

THE PRESIDENT'S SECRET



Paul Kettl



**The
President's
Secret**

By Paul Kettl

For Kathleen...

--thanks

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The characters in this book, aside from historical figures are fictional. Any similarity to any person living or dead is coincidental.

Did you ever wonder
why politicians act the
way they do?

It was all on television.

Governor Amanda Stonegate, the Republican presidential nominee, was speaking in Salt Lake City on a stage covered with red, white and blue bunting, framed by the majestic snow capped mountains behind her. She called out to the crowd, “In only a few weeks, you must decide the future course of this great nation. You must decide whether America will simply be a follower, or once again take its rightful place as the world’s leader. To regain its stature as the head of the community of nations, America must rebuild its military, prepare a strong national defense, and reinforce our intelligence community.” The former beauty queen was striking, and the magnificent setting seemed to amplify her plea as she struggled to win votes in the last weeks of the race for The White House.

Governor Stonegate, however did not notice the commotion in the crowd to the left of the stage. At first, the disheveled young man simply jostled those to either side of him. He was calling out at times, but his cries could not be heard above the din of the throng who loudly cheered the presidential nominee. Then, suddenly, he broke free of the crowd, and charged the stage. The state policeman and the secret service agents did not see him or hear him either at first. But, the television camera saw all.

One burly local policeman reached for him when he shoved a woman with two children aside. The cop managed to grab an arm, but the man broke free.

The young man yelled, "She's the devil...she escaped from hell." He continued to scream as he approached the stage. By this time, Governor Stonegate turned toward him, as did most of the crowd. Police and secret service agents surged in his direction, but he adroitly jumped to the stage. Stonegate simply stared at him, seemingly daring him to come closer.

He did.

The young man screamed out again, "Kill the devil, she must be destroyed," and rushed the podium. One group of secret service agents tackled him, as another group surrounded Governor Stonegate and rushed her off stage. People in the crowd screamed in fear, and the young man continued to shriek about the devil. He was now fully restrained by three secret service agents, one of whom was kneeling on his back, service revolver drawn, with one hand supporting the wrist holding the gun. The agent pointed his gun slowly to the left and then to the right of the stage, while the man underneath him continued his chant.

"Kill the devil! Yes, kill her! Kill the evil devil."

Two other agents joined the first secret service agent, talking loudly into their sleeves while more members of the crowd screamed out in fright. Others in the crowd simply fell to the ground, seeking safety, trying to disappear. Television cameras continued to roll as the growing group of police and secret service agents handcuffed the man, and dragged him behind the red, white and blue bunting while he continued to shout, “No, NO. Kill the devil, not me. You must kill her...”

Several moments passed. Members of the crowd who moments earlier collapsed to the ground began to look around. Some ran to the exits, but most simply stared in disbelief. Some grabbed their head, and others simply covered their mouths, unable to call out.

Another minute passed and the crowd began to quiet, and then slowly began to talk in a loud buzz audible to the television cameras. Secret service agents and police all had weapons drawn, and the secret service agents seemed to be alternating holding their ear and talking to their sleeve. After a few more minutes, their weapons were again hidden behind blue suit jackets, but they did not leave the stage. A spokesman from the police urged everyone to keep calm and to stay in place as various police officers and secret service agents scanned all directions.

Shortly after that, another rumpled man, but this one wearing a sport coat with a large “Stonegate for President” button, nudged a secret service agent to the side, and approached the podium. “Thank you all for your cooperation and your bravery during this incident. The final security checks are being completed, and Governor Stonegate will be returning to the stage soon to convince you that she should be the next President of the United States!” The crowd began to clap, and then started to call out “Stonegate, Stonegate”, growing in volume as the moments passed. The spokesman for the campaign, John Sturgis, smiled, and clapped in unison with the crowd as he stood by the podium. A full two minutes passed, and Governor Amanda Stonegate again appeared at the side of the stage, but this time she was wearing a coat, with something bulky underneath.

Secret Service agents now framed the podium, instead of the tranquil mountain scene evident at the beginning of the event. Stonegate strolled across the stage, waving to the crowd, and the cheers grew louder and louder. She walked first to one side of the stage, and then turned to wave to the other side of the venue. The coat hid her beauty queen figure, but her auburn hair glistened in the sunlight as she waved both arms to the crowd. She

returned to the podium, now holding her hands out, raising them and lowering them, asking for quiet.

The crowd now was standing, and began to quiet, when someone from the front of the gathering yelled, “Go get ‘em Stonewall Stonegate”. She turned to the man, and smiled. The crowd again roared its approval.

Again, she waved, and then asked them to quiet. “Are you all OK?,” she asked the crowd. “After seeing the last poll numbers, I knew I wasn’t popular with everybody,” she joked. The crowd laughed in relief, and then broke into applause.

“Thank you all for your cooperation and your bravery during this event. Everyone, including me and the confused man who rushed the stage are okay,” she said. The crowd seemed to exhale as a group.

“Now, let’s get back to talking about the importance of a strong national defense,” she smiled. The crowd laughed softly, and she continued. “These men to my right and left did their job. We all are safe because of them and their bravery. We let them do their job. Don’t you think it’s time Washington got out of the way of our troops, and allowed them to do their job?”

The crowd roared its approval and the secret service agents to her right and left seemed to stand a little taller.

She continued, “Now, in Washington, the bureaucrats control and manage everything. Our military is not allowed to collect intelligence, and our men and women in uniform are not able to act to protect us. We need a strong national defense, and we can best accomplish that by letting our men and women go out and do their job, without interference from Washington!” the Republican presidential nominee called out to the crowd. “This election is about what direction this great country will go not only in the next four years, but well into the future. Are you happy with where America is heading now?” she called out to the crowd.

“No, NO,” the crowd hissed back to the stage. “Do you want bureaucrats in Washington running everything with endless regulations? Do you want them running YOUR national defense?” she called out to the crowd.

The cheers and clapping were so enthusiastic, no one seemed to notice the police van backing up to the stage, quickly loading a restrained man and then pulling quickly away. But, the TV camera, of course, captured every detail.

I was watching the rally on television and saw the van leaving the event with the television anchor’s voice informing me and all the other viewers, “Governor Stonegate went on to finish her speech to the crowd in Salt Lake City.

The man who rushed the stage was not armed, thankfully, and we learned that he has a long mental health history. His family says that the young man is from Montana, Governor Stonegate's home state, and apparently followed the campaign to this stop in Salt Lake City. They told our reporters that he suffers from schizophrenia. He was hospitalized several times, but of late, he has been homeless, wandering, and off his medication for some time."

I said to my wife Terese, "I see once again we don't need psychiatry." "Andy, at least everyone is OK," she said, always offering the reasonable point of view. "Too bad they don't have my favorite shrink out west," she said, giving me a hug and studying me with those blue eyes.

"Who knows where your favorite shrink will be after my meeting with my boss and the accountants this morning," I said, again shaking my head. You see, I was the chairman of the psychiatry department at Philadelphia State University College of Medicine. The days of psychiatry making money were in the past, and Philadelphia State, which I suppose never really had a golden age, now was struggling in the morass of deep financial troubles in a troubling time. This October morning would bring the first quarter financial numbers for both my department and the medical school hospital as well. Both were expected to be

bleak.

I drove to the medical school building encased in its decaying Philadelphia neighborhood, and eased my car into my parking space. The building looked darker than usual.

The heavy doors at the front of the medical school building were from a bygone era, seeking to impress the visitor to this institution of medical achievement. Now, they looked old, tired, and a bit dirty. I walked down the hallways anchored by white linoleum floors polished to a glare, with cinder block walls standing sentry, surrounding me on either side. I was reluctant to enter the board room. Governor Stonegate might have done an inspiring job staring her attacker down, but I wanted to run away from the accountants and bureaucrats who were sure to attack me.

But no special protector would arrive to take them away. I entered the Board Room of the medical school building where the first part of the meeting, the one to which I was not invited, was just concluding.

The Dean of the medical school, Doctor John Wallingforce seated himself ceremoniously at the head of the long table, flanked by administrators with computer print outs and papers. No one was smiling except for the Dean who perpetually had a smile on his tanned face -- except when you met with him alone. "Andy, thanks for coming," he said, as if I had a choice.

"The first quarter numbers for the hospital are worse than expected," Dean Wallingforce said in a monotone that

contradicted the flash of his artificially white teeth. All of the accountants examined the papers in front of them, and none of them looked at me. “We’re drowning in debt, and we can’t keep this up. Your psychiatry beds aren’t doing any worse than last year, but they’re not doing any better either. We’re going to have to close all of our inpatient psychiatry beds. Something with a more positive revenue stream will have to go in that space.”

“How can you have a medical school without psychiatry?” I gestured toward a large window offering a panorama of the decaying neighborhood surrounding us. “How can you serve the community, especially this community, without psychiatry?”

Philadelphia State had a tradition of serving the poor. This neighborhood’s combination of drug abuse, along with the mental health problems that accompany poverty and old age inundated our wards. Psychiatry, in general, lost money, but psychiatry for the old and poor bled money.

“Sorry, Andy. We just can’t afford it anymore,” Dean Wallingforce said flatly. The accountants continued to find their papers or their shoes very interesting.

“Didn’t you see the news this morning, with that mentally ill guy charging the stage toward Stonegate? We have to offer psychiatric services. People are suffering, and they need us, especially in this neighborhood,” I said.

“Sorry, Andy, we need a more positive revenue stream,” the Dean said, with the smile fading from his face, and irritation growing in his voice.

I emptied the change from my pocket and threw it across the table. “That’s how much you’ll save without us,” I said. “People will still crush the emergency room with their needs, or will clog your medical wards.”

“Dr. West, stop it. The decision has been made. The psychiatry beds are gone. Watch yourself, or you’ll go with them,” he said.

I stared at him, not knowing what to say, and he stared back at me, daring me to do something. All I could think to say was “Kill the devil”, but no one had to restrain me to avoid saying that.

I simply said with a low voice, “Is there anything else?”

Dean Wallingforce with a similar low voice said, “No, thank you for coming, Dr. West,” and stood to show me the door.

The cinder blocks coated with green paint seem to close in on me as I walked slowly down the hall. I took a chair by the library, and buried my head in my hands.

Looking up, I saw a perky twenty something medical student bounded towards me. She was bright, energetic, attractive and full of the enthusiasm of youth. Her blond hair glistened in the artificial light as she bounded down the hall towards me.

“Thanks for that lecture on schizophrenia, Dr. West”, she called out to me over the pile of books that didn’t quite block her infectious smile. “The whole disease finally made sense to me,” she added.

I wanted to call out to her, “Don’t waste your time studying diseases that don’t make money,” but I couldn’t bring myself to be honest with her. She beamed at me, with her face even shinier than the linoleum floor.

“Uh, thanks,” was all I managed to say.

“Cool,” she said, and bounded down the hall.

I continued to stare at my shoes, overwhelmed by my failure to keep my psychiatry beds open, despite their obvious need. After a long while, I eventually managed to pull myself to my feet.

Walking toward the door, I met a small group of medical students, one of whom called out, “Hi Dr. West, how’s the crazy business?”

I answered, a little too quickly, “Crazier than you can imagine.”

“See you at lecture,” one answered back with a smile oblivious to my distress. They waved, and I watched them leave. I envied their youth, their energy, and their naiveté. I dragged myself to my feet, and wandered out the door.

I found the parking lot, and my Chevy was still there, always an iffy proposition in this neighborhood. Soon, I would be home with my wife, Terese, who had the magical power to make the rest of the world and its problems go away. Through medical school, residency and even my own run for congress, she had been my safe haven, the place where bad things faded.

Even she might not be able to shelter me from this one.

Chapter 2

As I passed one traffic light after the other, the leaves covering all the trees around me appeared to change color. Summer was over, and October was now fully taking hold, with the leaves turning gold and orange before they died and dropped from the trees. My career felt like it was dying too. Closing the inpatient units at Philadelphia State Hospital seemed to be an utter defeat. Knowing that a generation of medical students would begin to believe that psychiatry did not belong in a hospital was almost too much for me to bear.

I pulled my car into my driveway, thankful that Terese's car was already there. Even after twenty years of marriage, sometimes I would see her and my breath would catch, just like the first time we met. Then, I was a medical student, totally lost on the medical unit, and she was serving as the charge nurse for the graveyard shift on the medical ward even though she was only twenty three at the time. Only two years out of nursing school, she was most definitely in charge, and I was most definitely lost.

Then, I was wandering through the nursing station, trying to find a medical chart. I was worried, uncertain and overwhelmed. I always did well in the classroom, but here

wandering in the hospital, it was completely different.

Noises, smells and the tumultuous ailments of humanity were dumped on us as we entered one room and then another. People were dying in one room, next to a room where some, overwhelmed by their drinking refused to live. Being a medical student, you are supposed to look like you know what you are doing while knowing your job now is to actually find out what a doctor does. But, above all, you know you are the low man on the totem pole- below the doctors, and below the nurses, and even below the cleaning staff, who at least had something to contribute to the operation of the hospital. I knew I was supposed to be polite, and I also knew the cardinal rule for medical students: Don't get in the way. But, here I was, in the middle of the nurse's station, looking for a chart, and I was most certainly in the way.

"Hey, rookie, I was working there," Terese said. She turned toward me and flashed those eyes. I still am not sure what color they are. Depending on the day, and her mood, they seem to drift from an ocean blue to a more soft, aquamarine. Then, they were a deep fiery blue. I was in trouble. I knew that I needed to move, but staring at her, I couldn't. I looked at her, and my mouth dropped open. I lingered, in the way, even longer.

“Rook, do you need something?” she asked in a slightly softer tone. I stammered out something that sounded like I needed a chart, and she said, “Doesn’t everybody.” She turned and continued to work, and I was lost.

I looked for reasons to return to that nursing station day after day. It took me four days to realize Terese worked the evening shift. It took me seven more daily trips to the ward after that to actually have a conversation with her, and after a few more days, she even smiled at me.

“Rook, having a better day today?” she asked that day. Finally, I said, “it would be great if you would have coffee with me.” Remarkably, she agreed to spend her twenty minute lunch break with me, and we drifted to the cafeteria. I was very self conscious, yet proud that my fellow students were staring at me walking next to her. Years later, when I asked her why she agreed to go out with me, she simply said, “You seemed so lost, and I felt sorry for you. You also didn’t seem like the typical med student, trying to impress everyone in the hospital with the usual combination of intelligence and arrogance. You seemed to know you truly didn’t know what you were doing, let alone what was going on in the hospital. You looked like a lost puppy,” she said.

“I’m glad you adopted me,” I told her, and she smiled back with those aquamarine eyes flashing.

Terese always seemed to know me better than myself. This was especially embarrassing during my psychiatry residency. Then, when I considered myself a growing star at the Ivy League institution across town, I felt I had deep insight into the human condition.

“Don’t give me that crap,” she said. “You’re scared to death of that patient, that’s why you want to bring in his family for an interview. You just want witnesses,” she told me once.

But, it was that first kiss that sealed the deal. When we went out that night, I drove her home, and before I left her living room, I bent over to kiss her. Her lips were so soft, they seemed to envelope me, and when she flashed those fully turquoise eyes, I was taken.

Over two decades later, those eyes still sparkled. I remember when we were engaged thinking, “I could stare at those eyes for a long time”. I still could.

Our front door creaked as usual when I opened it, bringing me back to the present, but the smile that reminded me of our past was still there. Terese called out, “Hi Andy. Still stamping out mental illness?”

I simply walked over and she gasped as she saw me.
“My God, who died?” she said.

“I’m not sure if I have,” I said. “I met with the administrators, and they are certain they’re going to close down the psych beds at Philadelphia State. The first quarter numbers,” I continued, “were even worse than last year’s, and they tell me they need to act now to stop the bleeding.”

“What did you do,” Terese asked.

“Well, at first I objected,” I said, “then I made a bunch of platitudes about the importance of psychiatry for healthcare and for education. I might as well as been talking to the concrete walls,” I said. “They only saw the money, and we’re not making enough now. I then took the change out of my pocket, threw it across the table, and said ‘that’s how much you’ll save by getting rid of psychiatry’.”

“Did they try to take you to the emergency room -- for sedation,” she said, only half joking.

“No,” I said, “but I was trying to debate whether I should get myself fired as well.”

“Going down with the ship kills the captain, too,” she said.

I tried to smile back at her, but all I could think to say was, “I felt so totally defeated. I should have been able to do something to stop this.”

Terese looked at me, and while I expected to see sympathy coming from her eyes, she only stared at me.

“Andy, have you talked with The Oracle about all of this,” Terese asked. I stopped, and looked down.

The Oracle was an experienced member of the Philadelphia Psychoanalytic community. He ruled over a group of psychiatrists in a private practice on the Main Line, and seemed to know what was going to happen to people before events actually occurred. He had a reputation for being able to evaluate people so thoroughly that he actually knew things and could predict events in advance and was able to warn people about the future, earning him the name, “The Oracle”. While some thought he could actually tell the future, the other theory about him was that he wasn’t brilliant, only incredibly well connected with the rich and neurotic, and they told him things they didn’t tell their wives. So, he knew everything simply because he heard it first. I liked to think that he would never tell any privileged information from one of his patients, and I preferred to think that he simply could see things we mere mortals couldn’t.

Though, I was never sure.

He was one of my teachers in my psychiatry residency at the great institution across town, and he was one of those people with his picture on the wall by the auditorium behind the ivy covered walls. Having schooled generations of psychiatrists in psychoanalysis, he was a revered figure at the Ivy League institution where I did my training.

I saw him though for another reason. He, despite his lofty position in the minds of the psychiatric community of Philadelphia was actually a nice guy, and I always felt better talking with him. I still talked with him for what we called “supervision”, but we both knew it was for therapy.

I looked back at Terese and said, “Why do you think I should talk with him now? He can’t fix the department.”

“You always look better after your meetings,” Terese added knowingly.

“I suppose,” I added, but I was afraid this series of events and the personal blow of losing the units at Philadelphia State would take more than one meeting.

Terese came over and gave me a hug. “You’ll survive this, Andy. You’ve been through tough times before, and always found a way. You’re a survivor,” Terese told me.

“I’ll survive, but I don’t know what the sausage will look like on the other end,” I added. I devoted my career over the last decade to building the department at Philadelphia State, and now, all of that was about to be sunk by the rising tide of bureaucracy and managed care.

“But, enough about me – it’s too depressing,” I said. “How was your day,” I asked Terese.

She somehow found a way to get her master’s degree in nursing while working full time over the years, and was now teaching at the community college nursing school. “Actually, it was a great day,” she said. “You know that project I submitted to the American Nursing Association,” she asked. “Well, they liked it, and I’m presenting it at the annual meeting in two weeks,” she said proudly.

“Wow, that’s phenomenal,” I gushed. For a paper to be accepted from a community college at that national meeting was truly an accomplishment.

“Yup,” she said, “I’ll be presenting our new plan of addressing health problems in women while they’re pregnant – before they and the baby can get into trouble. I’ll be presenting it at the national meeting in New York. And, to make matters better, the paper is on the first day of the meeting, when everybody will be there,” she beamed. “Big Apple, here I come,” Terese said.

“Well, if you can make it there, you’ll make it anywhere,” I said trying to smile. “I’m glad one of us is at least doing something productive.”

Chapter 3

Terese and I sat down for dinner, and in the background, the television which seemed like another character in our lives blasted unwelcome events from the news into our house. The evening news with the latest sound bytes from the presidential campaign raged around us. October always seems to bring the news media to a frenzy covering the nominees for president from both parties and Governor Amanda Stonegate, the Republican nominee, was now fodder feeding the frenzy in the presidential debate. She was only in her mid forties and being a former beauty queen, pictures of her seemed to gravitate readily to television.

The news tonight was full of scenes from her campaign stop in Salt Lake City where the deranged man rushed the stage and charged Stonegate. The picture of the secret service agent kneeling on the young man with his gun drawn began every newscast. The sounds of the crowd screaming filled the background as the news anchor intoned coverage of the event. He said solemnly, "The young man who rushed the stage trying to attack Governor Stonegate died tonight in jail. He was found in his cell, hanging by his own belt in an apparent suicide."

Terese reached over and held my hand tighter.

“My God,” I said, “Didn’t they take any precautions? The man was obviously psychotic, ill, and desperate,” I said to the TV.

The news anchor threw the story to a bright young man with a great head of hair who was standing in front of the mountains surrounding Salt Lake City. He intoned, “City officials tell us that the young man was immediately taken from Stonegate’s campaign rally where he charged the stage to the city jail. He seemed to calm himself in the ride to the jail, and submissively answered questions and the intake process in the jail. City officials say he was left alone for only a brief time, and when they returned, he was hanging in his cell.”

“A tragedy averted this morning becomes a tragedy tonight for the young man and his family,” the anchor bellowed to the camera in his deep voice.

“He didn’t have to die,” I said. “He was obviously ill. He needed treatment, and he could have been so easily helped with the right medication. If the jail personnel knew anything at all, they wouldn’t leave a man that psychotic all by himself. He died a needless, senseless death,” I screamed at the television.

“Andy, I’m sorry, but you can’t save the world,”
Terese said to me, searching me with those blue eyes.

“I can’t even save my department. Without those
psychiatry beds, more people will die like this – just not on
television,” I told her.

Terese looked down and said, “Well, we all die
sometime, and even my favorite shrink can’t save
everybody.”

I looked down, and slowly said, “Boy, that’s the
truth.”

We listened to the rest of the news in front of dinner.

In the presidential campaign, the Democratic
nominee, Vice President John Mooring continued to focus
on the success of the last four years of the current
administration. The last four years had indeed gone well.
There had been no terrorist attacks such as those that
marked the first term. Then, attacks in Minneapolis and
Houston killed over a hundred Americans inflaming the
nation’s passions.

The first in Minneapolis was the most dramatic with
three men throwing grenades into the crowded Mall of
America. The attack in Houston bombed a movie theater.

Finally, there seemed to be peace with the terrorists who hunkered down in Syria. Pundits claimed the terrorists had control of the government there, and while the Syrians made periodic threats, they struggled with their own problems of managing a government bureaucracy. The Israelis kept an eye on their neighbor and periodically launched cross border raids to eliminate this suspected threat or another, which brought loud protests from the Syrians, but “world security” had become the watchword that seemed to dominate the day and international politics. The need for a tighter national security, though, was not far from the consciousness of Americans who continue to survey the candidates.

“I kind of like Stonegate, even though I don’t agree with a lot of what she says,” Terese noted.

“That’s just because she’s a woman, the first woman to win a party’s nomination,” I countered.

“No, there’s more than that,” she said testily. “Stonegate is a fresh face, and she brings energy to the debate.” “And that killer body,” I added.

“Get your head out of your pants,” Terese said, “It’s been a long time since she was Miss Montana”.

Governor Amanda Stonegate's path was a remarkable story. After being named Miss Montana, Stonegate graduated from the University of Montana Law School before joining the state legislature.

There, she was elected by her peers to become speaker of the assembly before becoming governor. Then, as governor, she earned the title "Stonewall Stonegate" by refusing to raise taxes to pay for schools, or any other project, no matter who was behind it.

Charisma, a pretty face, and a solid message of no taxes led Stonegate to the nomination. But, her hawkish, tough views on national defense coupled with her lack of national and international experience in the national presidential campaign led her to a solid eleven point deficit in the polls behind Vice President Mooring.

The news on television drifted into the background, and we shared news about our day. I talked about the ongoing disaster at Philadelphia State, and Terese smiled sympathetically. Terese also filled me in about her presentation to the national nursing meeting today.

I told her, “I can’t tell you how proud I am of your health care plan, and I’m not surprised that the gurus of nursing administration want to hear more about it,” I told her. “That meeting in New York is a stage you’re ready to conquer.”

Terese only said, “Thanks, I hope it goes well- -and I do think promoting the health care of poor, pregnant women is a very important topic.”

We both settled into the couch next to each other, and we got some work done. About an hour later, Terese turned to me and said, “Andy, get a good night’s sleep, and then call the Oracle tomorrow to get your psyche an oil change.”

“Just don’t kick the tires tonight,” I told Terese. She smiled at me impishly, and said, “I have other ideas,” She reached over and kissed me.

The world drifted away.

Chapter 4

I drove to work the next morning on the Schuylkill “Expressway”. The word “Expressway” is always in quotes because the four lane highway through the middle of Philadelphia was perpetually gridlocked with traffic. Along the route were signs that read “to Vine street: 5 miles, 14 minutes”. Everyone knew those signs were deceiving. While Vine Street indeed was five miles away, it would take far more than the 14 minutes promised to get there in this morning rush hour traffic. Life was not that predictable, and we all knew it. The signs told us what we should expect. While we hoped the future would turn out that way, somehow we all knew that it would not. The warnings were never good enough, and seldom useful. Predicting the future seemed impossible.

My Chevy eased into my parking space, and I managed to avoid hitting the BMW belonging to the head of orthopedic surgery on my right and the Cadillac Escalade belonging to the head of radiology to my left. It seemed like they were squeezing me out of my parking space just like they were squeezing me out of the hospital. I shrugged my shoulders looking at my old Chevy. I reminded myself that the BMW and the Cadillac Escalade were moving far earlier

in the morning into the parking lot than was my clunker. Those guys were paid a lot more, but they moved earlier and longer. That's the price of money.

I tried to walk into the hospital with a quick gait, full of purpose, but it was hard. Today would be marked by meeting with the staff of the inpatient units to try to explain the decision to shut down all of the psychiatry beds in the hospital, and most of their jobs. They were all talented docs, and most would be snapped up by other hospitals and clinics in town. But, the sad truth was we were being discarded for something that would make more money.

The noon meeting came all too soon, and I was not ready. Looking around at the room of ten bright young psychiatrists, and about five who probably would take this opportunity to simply retire, I related the sad tale of the hospital's finances. The accounting sheets were even worse than expected, I explained, and probably worse than I or they knew. The inpatient units would be closed gradually over the next two months, and by New Years Day, they and most of their jobs would be closed for good.

Some greeted the news with outrage, yelling at me for allowing such a thing to happen. I simply agreed with them that it was an outrage, but there was little I or anyone else could do. Psychiatry, and psychiatry for the poor, for sure, did not make money.

“But medicine is about more than making money,” one young psychiatrist said.

I wanted to say, “There’s where you’re wrong. We need to specialize in diseases of the rich.” But all I could tell him was, “I know, but the accountants worry about the survival of the building, and feel they have to act quickly.”

“Worse things could happen than losing this building,” someone called out from the back staring at the wood seats and fluorescent lights overhead. A few people laughed a bit, but most simply stared at me or at the floor.

“I’ll do all I can to find you jobs elsewhere,” I told them with as much sympathy as I could muster.

“Look we’re not worried about our jobs,” said one of the younger female faculty members. “We’re all good docs, and there’s a shortage of psychiatrists. Closing this place means we can get jobs making more money elsewhere. But, how do we reconcile our fears that a generation of medical students will enter here thinking that psychiatry does not belong in a hospital, or as part of medicine for that matter.”

I had no answer for that one.

Finally the inquisition ended, and I stumbled back to my office to examine my personal profile of work.

I had a small grant, and one of the drug companies wanted me to do a study on another new antidepressant, which would be easy to complete. My job as chair of the department would stay for now, and so I'd be OK for this year and probably next year. That was as far into the future as I wanted to see, and I realized that I couldn't predict the future any better than the warning signs on the Schuylkill Expressway.

My department was drifting away, and I couldn't think of anything I could do to save it. I called Terese, and told her about the meeting.

"Not good, but not as bad as it could have been," she said. I could only agree. "Have you talked with The Oracle yet," she asked.

"I'm too busy, especially now," I halfheartedly replied.

Terese knew better.

"I've watched you all week. Especially now you need to make that appointment," she told me.

“Look, I can get through this on my own,” I said. There was silence on the other end of the phone for a while, and then Terese said, “Andy, you know you need that session.”

I silently agreed and resolved to call him. I needed some help to get through this one. I saw The Oracle in the past from time to time. Visiting him was always anxiety provoking in a way. You never knew quite what you would learn when you entered his office, and you were never sure if you wanted to learn it. He had no secretary, no receptionist, and the door outside his office door simply listed his name. Everyone paid him in cash, or they didn't get in that door. Only he granted entry to his office from the waiting room, and appointments were granted after a message landed on his answering machine. He continued to use an old fashioned free standing answering machine which stood guard by his phone, blinking when a new message arrived. He would return calls before his next patient, at ten minutes before the hour. For an analyst, the hour was only 50 minutes long. They told time differently than the rest of us. Analysts focused on our time in the past, by shortening the present hour to fifty minutes. He called me back at ten minutes before five, and told me he could see me two days later at three in the afternoon.

I rearranged my schedule at the medical school and then found myself driving over to see him.

The Oracle's office was like stepping back into a time machine and emerging in 1970. The waiting room had soft

naugahide couches, with a hardwood floor in good shape, but it hadn't been polished for decades. A Navajo rug was on one wall, and a Monet print of water lilies was on the opposite wall. I guessed that was supposed to relax me. On the coffee table in front of me were African wood carvings of misshapen natives with large heads, and stringy arms. I looked down, and said to them, "What are you staring at?" I could never put together in my head how the Navajo rugs, Monet print and African wood carvings went together. I always felt I was missing a theme there somehow. But, that was what it was like meeting with The Oracle. Things were always there in plain sight, but you were always missing the connecting theme. That was The Oracle's job to piece together with you. The Oracle, though, always knew before you, and tried to guide you to the way out.

"Andy," I heard him call.

That was it. There was no formality, no gesture, no greeting at the door, no handshake. I was simply summoned to the office. The Sancta Santorum had two doors – an outer one to the waiting room, and an inner one guarding his office. I knew this arrangement was supposed to make the office more sound proof, and add to the feeling of security. It made me feel like I was entering a submarine.

“Have a seat,” he said.

I sat on an upholstered single seat, and he settled on an easy chair about five feet from his cluttered desk. It always seemed unfair that he had the comfy chair. The drapes were heavy surrounding the two large windows in the room allowing small amounts of light to enter. But the drapes always seemed to be hiding something in their layers of fabric. They too were decades old, as was the rug on the floor between us. Further off in the room were two couches facing each other, where I imagined he would meet with couples, or maybe face away from a patient in classic psychoanalysis, if he had any of those folks left.

Probably, he just used them to take a nap on slow days.

I looked up, and he was staring at me. He was likely in his mid sixties, but it was hard to tell. He looked much the same as I remembered from my residency training years earlier. He had a white beard, and grey hair. The beard always seemed a bit too long, and the hair was combed with the part in the middle. He wore a dress shirt, but no tie, and usually didn't wear a sport coat.

He was still staring at me.

I don't know how much time passed. I suppose it was only a minute or two, but it seemed like ten. Time in The Oracle's office didn't follow the usual rules of physics. Finally, I said, "I'm not doing too good".

He still stared.

"Philadelphia State is closing all their psych beds, and likely will be giving up on Psychiatry in any kind of meaningful way," I said.

"I heard they torpedoed you," The Oracle said.

I felt a bit surprised. He really did hear everything.

"I complained. I met with the accountants. I pointed out the year was only a quarter finished. But, the school is in the red, and we are losing more money than projected. They want to take our space and make it into a cardiovascular center," I said.

"Hearts make more money than souls," I said.

"So, you're not doing too good?" The Oracle reflected back to me.

"Hell no," I said with a louder volume than I intended. "I'm the boss, and who knows, maybe the last Chief of Psychiatry at Philadelphia State. What am I supposed to do, go down with the ship," I said a bit more softly.

The Oracle changed position in his chair, but just looked at me. He put both lips in his mouth and his white whiskers stood straight out pointing towards me.

“Damn,” is all I could utter. “I don’t know what I could have done,” I finally added. Slowly a tear dripped down my cheek. “Damn, I should have done something. Now it’s too late,” I almost shouted, now grateful for that second door.

The Oracle turned, and grabbed a box of tissues, and slid them in my direction.

“Screw you,” I said.

He only smiled.

“Andy, I’ve known you for a long time. I remember that bright, self conscious resident on my service. I still see you there,” the Oracle said.

“Yeah, thanks,” is all I could muster. A few moments of silence passed between us.

“Let’s look at a few things,” The Oracle finally said. “Look, Andy; Community psychiatry hasn’t made money in at least 15 years. Why do you think I’m here in my office rather than across town behind the ivy in your old stomping grounds?” he added. “You can’t make money taking care of the poor. That’s the simple fact. It’s a good thing to do, but a hard way to pay the bills,” he continued.

“Philadelphia State could encourage you at first as you were building a service to the community, and they had money from surgery coming in. Then, they could tolerate you as they danced your services out to the state asking for more money. But, now the state has no money, and after managed care sliced the money from surgery, the institution has no money. They certainly have no money to give to you,” he added.

“I don’t see how that’s your fault,” The Oracle told me.

“Look,” I said, “I understand the socioeconomics of health care as well as anybody, but I was the Chief, it was my job to save it.”

“Save it...an interesting choice of words,” The Oracle said softly.

It was then that I started crying. He only looked at me -- and then the tissues. I took the tissues silently, closed my eyes, and allowed myself to remember.

I was thirteen when I found out.

My dad had been drinking for a while, for as long as I remember, actually. But, he wasn’t an angry drunk. He would just sit at the kitchen table, with the newspaper spread out, and a six pack at his feet.

He would come home from work, and have dinner, and after the dinner dishes were cleared, he would simply stay there at the table. Sometime later, he would get up and go to the garage and get a six pack. Later that evening, the six pack was gone, and he was asleep. We would all try to remain quiet in the house, and the six pack, his absence, and the emptiness accompanying all of it was ignored. My mother ignored it. We ignored it. He was both there and not there—all at the same time. Over time, we learned to avoid the kitchen, and then, as more time passed, we learned to avoid my Dad. It seems that everyone learned that. Neighbors would enter the front of the house, and would never venture beyond the living room. My Mom was the only one who would venture to the back of the house, into the kitchen.

“Your father needs to wind down from work,” my mother would tell us. We let him wind down, and he would sit in the kitchen. We would watch TV, or do our homework, or play outside. He would sit in the kitchen. It was a warm summer day, when I was thirteen, when I found out he had stomach cancer. No one in those days used the word cancer. But, my mother took my younger brother and me aside one day, and said that Dad wasn’t well.

He had stomach trouble, and was very sick. He was likely to get sicker, she said. I was thirteen, and a man of the world, or at least of the neighborhood. I was used to Dad not taking much part in things. I knew I could have been a better kid, better behaved, with a better mood. But, I didn't think Dad should simply withdraw.

"What can I do to help?" I asked my mother.

"Just be a good boy...the best boy you can be," she said. I tried to do better.

He died three months later.

Decades later, The Oracle and I discussed this evening over and over.

"No, I didn't think I could have prevented his death by being a good boy -- don't be silly," I said. "No, I don't think he withdrew from us because of my behavior," I said. Then, I cried. Once, I cried for the whole hour, and he charged me for it anyway.

"You can't predict the future, and you can't change a lot of the present," the Oracle said. "You can't save everything, even if you really care about it, and really want to," he said. "That would be nice," he said. "But even a nice boy is limited," he said.

I shot him a glare. "Don't push your luck," I said.

“Andy, you’re a talented doc,” he said. “That smartass stuff you carry around makes you popular with the students and a pain for the administrators,” he added. “That adolescent anger is still there, but you find a way to use it. Keep finding a way to use it. You can’t save everything, but that doesn’t mean you can’t save anything,” he finally said.

“But, what to save, how to do it?” I asked.

“That is not the question,” the Oracle said.

“Jesus, what is the question?” I blurted out.

“The real question is how to save you in the midst of this,” he told me slowly.

“I’m OK,” I said.

“I thought you weren’t ‘doing too good,’” The Oracle said. I could only look down at the worn carpet between us.

“Our time is up,” he said.

I stared at him. He got up and opened one door and then the other. “Perhaps we should arrange another time,” he said.

Chapter 5

When I arrived home I was the only one there, and it occurred to me that it was only 4:30 in the afternoon. As I walked around the house, it seemed empty, lonely. I wasn't used to being the first one home, since Terese usually beat me and my schedule home.

I was still feeling a bit stretched after talking with the Oracle, and sat down. The material about my father was old stuff, but still affected me. Yes, of course, I blamed myself for his death in my thirteen year old brain, but that was many years ago. Yes, of course, my mother was much more distant after his death, and my thirteen year old brain didn't recognize grief then. But, I recognize it now.

The grief I felt now at the loss of my department at the medical school was much more real, much more palpable than those memories. But, I understood The Oracle's point. The unconscious or old habits die hard. That was the first reaction. I would have to come up with a second reaction to get through this latest problem, and hopefully conquer it in some way.

Terese walked in, and when I saw her, I was again transfixed by her eyes. That face didn't seem much different than when I saw it on that nursing unit decades ago. "I'm a lucky guy," I said.

"You're silly," she replied, but gave me a hug. "You should see The Oracle more often," she drolly commented.

"You know it's not that," I said.

"I think it must be," she said. "Over the last week, you've been in the stratosphere. I had to tie a rope around your ankle to reel you in."

"I'm sorry, it's been hard," was all I could say. "But I know I have to find a way to survive this."

"My favorite shrink will find a way, I know," Terese hugged me.

I hoped she was right about that. She usually was, but I couldn't see any way out of this one, but I knew that I would have to find a new way, another solution around this problem.

The rest of the evening was simply peaceful. Terese worked on her presentation to the American Nursing Association, and I looked halfheartedly through journals. Being with her, I simply felt comforted.

We turned on the TV, watched the news and the late night comics were throwing jabs at the presidential candidates. “A crisis is looming in the Mooring campaign,” one commented about the Democratic nominee for president with his serious deep voice.

Mooring was the Vice President for a popular president, and he assumed the presidency was his. He had waited his turn. He deserved this.

“A wrinkle has been discovered in Mooring’s white shirt,” the comedian deadpanned. “Do shirt wrinkles threaten the stability of the nation?” Turning to the next camera, he said, “Governor Stonegate of the great state of Montana reassured the public that she protected Montana from Canada to the north, grizzly bears to the west; and reassured us that now North Dakota to the east was no longer a threat. And, she demanded that the cost of Mooring’s stay free wrinkle guard should not be borne by the taxpayer.”

“We’re in for Mooring-Stonegate jokes for the next few weeks,” I said.

Terese added, “They’ll have the Vice President appearing statelier and more presidential, and Stonegate being the attack dog. That should supply enough jokes to last until the election.”

We turned off the lights, and I cuddled next to her. I felt loved, safe, and secure. Stonegate can argue for security, but I found it here. That was more important than any job. I closed my eyes.

Chapter 6

In the morning, two days later, I found myself driving again to The Oracle's office. Stuck in traffic on the Schuylkill Expressway, the traffic warning sign hung next the overpass read "City Avenue: 5 miles, 8 minutes". I didn't believe it.

I turned off, and headed down the East River Drive, which ran along the Schuylkill River. It was slower, but I was moving, and I convinced myself that it was faster. At least, I dodged the traffic. "Got around that problem," I said to myself.

But, I was ten minutes late for the appointment.

"You know we only have 50 minutes," The Oracle said.

"Yeah, I know, my unconscious resistance overtook my Chevy's engine causing it run slower leading me to avoid your appointment," I said.

"Psychiatrists make the worst patients," he said.

“So, how did you come,” he asked nonchalantly.

“The Schuylkill was backed up, and I took East River Drive,” I said.

“You turned away from the appointment,” he countered.

“Only because it was easier,” I said. This seemed more like a chess match than a discussion. “Your move,” I said.

“Let’s leave rush hour traffic outside,” he said.

“Sometimes a cigar is only a cigar?” I wondered out loud— quoting the famous Freud line.

“Yeah, yeah. So what are you thinking?” he wondered.

“Well, I came to the conclusion that my first reaction to the problem at Philadelphia State was anger coupled with the feeling that I had failed, someone, somehow,” I said. “That’s my habit,” I said.

“It’s not your habit, he said, you know it’s your unconscious”, The Oracle countered.

“You know I don’t buy all that crap,” I said. “Whether it’s the unconscious, a behavioral paradigm, a biochemical metaphor or some attempt at neuroanatomy, it’s all just an analogy to help get through life, to get around trouble. Me, I took East River Drive to get around trouble,” I countered.

“OK, now that we’re waist deep in analogies, now what” The Oracle asked me.

“I survive. I take a deep breath, and see where I’m at, and what I can do. It’s not clear, at least to me,” I said.

“Life is seldom clear,” The Oracle said. “Andy, recognize that your adolescent anger is simmering, and while you’ve developed a way to convert it to humor sometimes, and have it even be entertaining at times, remember it’s there. And, remember, like East River Drive that there are other ways around trouble.”

“But, you’ll still charge me for the ten minutes I was late,” I asked.

“Of course,” he said with a smile. “Andy, haven’t you ever failed before?” he asked.

“Well, when I ran for congress, that was a colossal failure, in a way,” I said.

“I never really heard about that,” The Oracle replied. “Can you fill me in?”

I sighed. “Back when Terese and I were living in Lancaster County, the incumbent congressman was a bloated elder statesman, who had been in congress for years, and usually won his re-election campaign without any opposition. Lancaster is only an hour by train from Philadelphia, but the beautiful rolling farm lands offered a peaceful setting that Philadelphia probably never had. Schools were good, just because people thought they should be. Land and housing was cheap, and so we bought a place there.”

“But, the bucolic surroundings weren’t paradise?”
The Oracle asked.

“Parts of it were. But, the good people of Lancaster county not only believed in good schools, solid farmland and hard work, but also in a very traditional way of life. They elected republicans to just about every office. In fact, the last democrat to be elected to congress from Lancaster county was James Buchanan in 1820. He saw his way to become president and mismanaged the country into the Civil War. The good people of Lancaster County learned their lesson and no democrat was elected to congress since,” I said with a smile. “One night, Terese and I were watching the news and Congressman Steadman was on TV again, condemning abortion yet praising capital punishment in the same sentence he said he respected life. I simply said to the TV, ‘Somebody should run against that guy.’ Terese turned to me and said, ‘Andy, aren’t you somebody?’ The Oracle smiled, as I continued. “I really had no idea what I was doing. I used to think that running for office meant the candidate examined the issues of the day, came up with ideas with reasonable arguments behind them.” Then, in an exciting format, the candidate would appear before the eager eyes of the assembled voters and sway their opinions.

I was quite naïve. Politics is really about asking people you don't know for a lot of money, and then asking them later for some more money. But, I didn't know that, and there was no Democrat establishment around to tell me any different. Nobody, including me thought I had a chance to win, but I gave it a go. I won the nomination unopposed, since no one else bothered to run, and the great Congressman had opposition on the ballot for the first time in years," I told The Oracle.

"Weren't you afraid that you would lose," The Oracle asked. "No, I knew I would lose. But as the race went on, I began to care about winning. So, I challenged the great congressman to a debate and I won the first one. Having taught psychiatry at a medical school for years, I was no stranger to speaking to, or trying to entertain diffident crowds. The bloated congressman was a bit shocked, and we had several more debates. I spoke wherever I could, usually starting with the line, "With the way things are in Washington, how can you send anyone but a psychiatrist to Congress?" I told The Oracle, as the smile became wider on his face.

“But, I raised no money, and did about as well as everyone expected. I garnered only 34% of the vote, and the bloated congressman feasted on his victory. On election night, spent in my living room watching the returns, I called the congressman to extend my congratulations. He refused to take the call. So, it was a colossal failure, I suppose,” I added.

“Did you really think you failed?” The Oracle asked.

“I guess not,” I said. “Even at the time, I was proud that I was able to bring up issues about health care, and the importance of mental health. And, I had a great time running for office. Free of the constraints of having to do the right things to win, I could speak my mind and say whatever I wanted. Speak it, I did.” I smiled, and added, “Terese said, ‘Give a smartass an audience, and he’ll be hard to shut up’ “.

The Oracle responded, “Will Rogers, put it in another way. In a democracy, he said, ‘Any citizen can run for office...and that’s the chance you take’.”

“It really was an engaging experience,” I said. It gave me an appreciation for democracy, and also for marketing,” I added.

“And, speaking of marketing, the people at Philadelphia State offered you the job to be Chief-right after that?” he asked.

“That’s right,” I said. “The race for congress brought me a little press, and I was eager to try something new after feeling a bit stuffy, and stuffed away in the ivy halls across town. Philadelphia State seemed to offer a chance to build something new. Now, all of it seems flushed down the drain.”

The Oracle stared at me. “When you ran for Congress, you lost in a huge landslide. But, you managed to find a way to make something out of that. You found a new way out, a way to make a new path, or a new statement for yourself,” he said.

“I suppose,” I added weakly.

“Don’t you think you can do that again?” he asked.

“But, this is something I really care about. It’s not just a hobby or a personal dare,” I said.

“Even more reason to find the way out. You have to find something new, do something different,” The Oracle commanded.

He again gathered his lips into his mouth, and those white whiskers from his beard pointed straight out at me, seeming to dare me to try something new, to think my way around the problem.

“I’ll have to think about that one,” I said.

“It’s worth the effort,” The Oracle said. “Like East River Drive, there is always another way around a problem,” he said.

“So, are you heading off to Philadelphia State to slay the dragon?” the Oracle asked.

“Eventually,” I said, “but first I want to wish good luck to Terese. She had a paper accepted at the American Nursing Association, and she’s leaving this morning for New York to deliver the paper.”

“How you ever snagged her years ago is beyond me,” the Oracle said at the door.

“It’s a perpetual mystery to me too,” I said.

I left The Oracle’s office, feeling better.

The world looked the same, but I felt better prepared somehow, for what, I wasn’t yet sure.

I pulled my car out of the parking spaces in front of his office, and guided the car back onto the Schuylkill Expressway. The rush hour traffic now had faded, and traffic was moving.

The sign greeting me said, "Vine St., 5 miles -6 minutes".

"Should be smooth sailing today," I thought.

I pulled into the driveway in front of my house, and as I opened the door, I saw Terese's suitcase in the hall. "Ready to go?" I asked.

"Yup, she said. I like the presentation. We worked hard on the slides for the program. Getting care to women who need it is an ongoing effort," she said.

"Worthy of a discussion at a national meeting," I added and smiled at her. She smiled back, and I ran to her and hugged her.

"Hey, sailor, easy. I've got to go," she said. Opening the door to leave, she added, "Don't get into too much trouble while I'm gone."

Chapter 7

I watched Terese pull away from the house and then finally dragged myself into my car to make it to work. I would be late today, but these days, it didn't seem to matter all that much.

The news station on the car radio on the way into work continued to buffet my ears with ongoing commentary about the presidential campaign. Vice President Mooring still enjoyed a big lead in the polls with only weeks to go before the election. Most of the experts whose names faded before my ears commented on how Mooring seemed to be on cruise control at this point in his campaign, and seemed to be cruising to victory. Only one person, a female reporter from the west who followed Governor's Stonegate career, was not ready to concede the election. "Not yet," she said. "Stonegate's a remarkable woman, and has always been a fighter," she pointed out.

Eventually, the traffic parted enough to allow me to make it to Philadelphia State. The building looked like a grey elephant in a neighborhood of aging row homes, and boarded up shops.

Entering the medical school building, I passed the security guard reading the newspaper on my right, who gave me his usual “Hello, Doc” with a smile.

Then, when I entered the elevator, I was joined by two physicians I knew casually. One was with the cardiovascular unit, primed to take over our space. He saw me, grunted a quick “Hi”, and then the floor of the elevator seemed very interesting to him.

The other physician was a woman from family medicine, with whom I taught a few medical school classes. She said, “Andy, how are you doing?” and her eyes filled with sympathy.

“I’ve had better days,” I said.

“News is getting around...I’m so sorry. What are you going to do?” she asked. The cardiovascular doc seemed to shrink into the corner of the elevator, and then quickly left the elevator at the next floor.

“I don’t really know what I’ll do,” I said, “It’s a difficult time for the whole department.”

“I can only imagine,” she said. “Maybe your guys will be getting out of here in time before the whole place blows up, like rats leaving a sinking ship,” she added.

“Could be, but nobody feels lucky right now,” I countered.

“Hang in there,” she said, and gave me arm a squeeze.

As I walked down the hall to one of our inpatient psychiatry units, I was able to ignore the glare of the fluorescent lighting above, and the emptiness of the cinder block walls to either side of me. I unlocked the door to the inpatient psychiatry unit, and I could quickly see that the space was full of patients, and they were all sitting around watching TV. In an inpatient psychiatry unit, the television typically takes center stage. While it is turned off from time to time for discussions, it is usually on at least 20 hours a day, keeping the patients occupied, and keeping the night shift awake through the early morning hours.

I met with the head nurse, a woman in her late fifties, whose clinical skills were well known throughout the hospital. Her name was Barbara, and whenever a patient arrived who presented with problems so complicated that not even Barbara was sure what to do, the residents immediately labeled the diagnosis as “Barbara-Baffled”, and we knew then we would have a difficult time on our hands.

Walking over to her to discuss how the staff was doing with the news of the unit closing, I was stopped by the immediate quiet of the patients in the day room in front of the TV.

I looked over, and heard the announcer on the TV say, “Again, we do not have all the details at this time, and we have reporters rushing to the scene. But, we know there has been an incident on a northbound train heading into a tunnel toward New York City. Early reports from the scene tell us, and again, I repeat, that we have no verification of this, that an explosion occurred on board the train, and there are reported casualties.”

I felt my knees go weak. Terese, of course, was travelling by train to New York to present her paper, but surely, there were many trains heading into New York. I was still frozen, in place, by the news bulletin on TV. The gravity of the news quieted the patients, and more of the staff drifted toward the TV.

Barbara slowly walked toward me, and said, “You look like a ghost, do you feel OK?”

I simply told her, that I wasn’t feeling well just now, and she said, “You should sit down.”

I responded, “I think I’ll stick by the TV for now.” But, it was hard to get the words out. My throat was dry, and I almost choked on the words as they drifted out of my mouth.

“Why, what’s wrong?” she asked.

I wanted with all my being to simply say, “Nothing”, but I had worked with Barbara for ten years, and she knew that “nothing” would be a lie.

“My wife was traveling to New York today,” I said. The silence hanging in the air for those next seconds was palpable.

“Well, I’m sure she’s all right,” Barbara said. “Do you want something to drink – you still look pale.” I accepted some water, but kept my eyes glued to the television.

The news anchor intoned, “More reports are coming in from local first responders that there was an explosion of some kind on a train heading into a tunnel into New York City this morning. The structural integrity of the tunnel is intact, and rescue workers are able to enter the tunnel to give assistance.”

The television cameras scanned the scene, showing equal parts chaos and devastation. First responders were on the scene, and they were trying to get to the wreckage, all the while trying to keep the reporters back.

The anchor continued to intone, “We have only this raw video from the scene, but we are beginning to understand more of what happened on the scene.”

He paused.

“We now know the train was severely damaged, and one car is almost totally demolished. There are casualties, and hospitals in southern New York City have been put on emergency alert to accept any of the wounded that may require treatment. The cause of the event is not clear. We cannot confirm it was an explosion, but the Associated Press is reporting that a bomb was detonated on board the train. We have no independent confirmation of that report at this time,” the announcer said.

The television picture switched to scenes of ambulances and police vehicles, with sirens blaring as they passed.

“Helicopters now at the scene give us these unedited pictures,” and the grainy pictures showed only much activity at the entrance of the tunnel with ambulances and fire trucks crowding the area.

Feeling in my pocket for my cell phone, I quickly called Terese. However, after several rings, I only heard her voice loudly proclaiming through her voice mail message, “Hello, this is Terese. I’m not here right now, but leave a message. I’m interested in what you have to say, Caio!”

With as much composure as I could muster, I said, “Terese, I’m watching the news, and there’s been some kind of explosion on a train going into New York. Give me a call and assuage my anxiety. Thanks.”

I tried not to sound as worried as I felt. I knew that if she was already at her conference, it would be hard to hear the cell phone in the midst of the commotion of the meeting, and she would have her cell off for her presentation, and for any lecture. Still, I just cradled the cell phone in my hand, willing it to go off.

It was lifeless in my hand.

Barbara came over with a glass of water for me – in a paper cup. No glass was allowed on the inpatient psychiatry unit to avoid someone grabbing it, and using it as a weapon against themselves, or against us. The paper though seemed to accentuate the tremor in my hand. I drank the water, but my mouth was once again immediately dry as I heard the TV announcer.

“We can now confirm that there has been an explosion on board an Amtrak train en route to New York City. The train, which originated in Philadelphia, was due to arrive at Pennsylvania Station at 11:30 a.m., some thirty minutes ago.”

More unedited video passed before my eyes. “The train suffered an explosion while under a tunnel leading to the city. One car of the train suffered intense damage, and the other cars emerged relatively unscathed. Investigators at the scene report the engine of the train is intact, and it is not thought the source of the explosion came from the engine, or the front car. There was only a small fire on board one of the cars, which was quickly contained inside the tunnel by Amtrak staff. Local hospitals are reporting a small number of casualties and those victims are confirming that an explosion rocked the train, and then the train slowly came to a stop followed by total darkness inside the tunnel. Rescue crews from both New Jersey and New York quickly arrived, and the patients praised the calm and professionalism of these first responders. There are deaths reported on board, however. We go now to our reporter outside the emergency room of St. Mary’s Hospital in Lower Manhattan.”

The picture changed to a man in a sport shirt standing outside the hospital emergency room, talking to a disheveled middle aged man. “Were you on board the train that suffered the explosion?” the reporter said.

The man looked excited and relieved at the same time. “Yes, we were riding into New York. We entered the tunnel, and then all of a sudden, there was a loud boom, and then everything went dark, and the train seemed to stop suddenly. There was a loud metal “crunching” sound. I jammed into the seat in front of me and cut my arm. The train staff had us all go to the back of the train, and about ten minutes later, the firemen and ambulance people got there. Everything was lit up and we walked out of the back of the tunnel.”

“Was there much panic?” the reporter asked.

“Some people screamed, but the train personnel were in control, and they had flashlights which they used to show us the way, and we just did what we were told. They’re the real heroes of this whole thing,” the man said.

I tried to call Terese again, but once again, her phone rang four times, and left me with her voice message. Again, I heard, “Hello, this is Terese, I’m not here right now...” Again, I left a brief message, with a bit more urgency in my tone. “Terese, this is Andy, one of the trains going into New York had an explosion. Give me a call.”

I decided to leave the unit, and go back to my office.

There, I had a small TV we used for showing educational videos, but I could watch the news without worrying about how I may look. “I’m going to head upstairs,” I told Barbara.

She looked at me with a glance that wanted to convey concern but also be reassuring. “Give me a call if you need anything,” she said.

I unlocked the door to the unit, and locked it behind me as I left. I wandered down to the elevator. This time, thankfully, I was alone as I climbed the four floors to my office. I sat down, and tried to reassure myself. Of course, Terese would have her phone off at the meeting. I couldn’t remember which train she took to New York, but even if she was on this train, the blast had only affected one car.

Not reassured, I called her again. Again, the four rings sounded painfully, and Terese’s voice filled my ear, “Hello this is Terese. I’m not here right now...” I stared out the window, refusing to leave a message, but not knowing what else to do.

I turned on the television, and found CNN. The television screen was filled with sounds of sirens and police vehicles. The police were trying to form a line, and were pushing the reporters out of the way. The television picture switched back to the anchor.

“Again, here is what we know. An Amtrak train bound for New York from Philadelphia suffered an explosion this morning as the train entered a tunnel into Manhattan. The tunnel suffered only minor damage, but the explosion caused the train to derail. One car onboard the train suffered extensive damage. Early unconfirmed reports, and again, these are unconfirmed reports at the scene, say there are as many as six deaths and twenty three more people who were injured in the incident. The engine of the train, and the first two cars were apparently not involved in the explosion. However, the third car suffered major damage, and the cars behind derailed, and experienced some minor damage. The cause of the explosion is not clear. But, we are now getting reports from Al Jazeera that they received a phone call from a group identifying themselves as “The Quest” stating, and I quote here, that “One of our martyrs took a load of infidels to their death today as they entered New York.” We do not know if this group is responsible, or even if such a group exists, but we are investigating this report now with our staff.” The anchor repeated this two more times in different ways as he seemed to look to the side toward his earphone, and then look in a confused way at the camera.

“Now we go to our Jake Gadspar, who is travelling with the Mooring campaign to get some comment about the explosion,” the anchor said and the camera switched to a rainy scene where Vice President Mooring was under an umbrella held by the reporter. “Mr. Vice President, do you have any comment on the apparent explosion on the train entering New York this morning?” the reporter asked. “I have been in conversation with the President, and our first concern is for the safety of the passengers,” he blankly said. “Do you have any comment on whether a group called “The Quest” was involved?” asked the reporter. The cause of the explosion is under investigation by the National Traffic Safety Board, and it is too early to comment on the cause - - thank you,” Mooring blankly commented and then walked off to shake hands.

The anchor reappeared on the screen, and said, “We have also been able to get comments on the train explosion from Governor Stonegate who is campaigning in Florida. Here is our Susan Johnson,” he said.

A reporter appeared with a microphone standing in front of a grassy lawn surrounded by bright sunshine.

“A short time ago, I was able to speak to Governor Stonegate before she entered her campaign rally in Tallahassee,” she said.

“Here are her comments on the train explosion today in New York,” she earnestly intoned.

“Governor, what comments do you have concerning the train explosion in New York,” the reporter asked as she almost ran next to the candidate entering a building.

“First, our hearts go out to those killed and injured in the incident. And we are proud of our brave women and men who responded so quickly to the scene preventing this incident from being even worse,” she said.

“What do you have to say about the reports that an Islamic fundamentalist group called “The Quest” was involved in the explosion?” the reporter asked.

Governor Stonegate stopped outside the building. She said, “It’s too early to know what really happened but not too early to say that we must always be vigilant, and must always try to defend America from attack,” the Governor said.

“Are you saying that this was not an accident?’ the reporter excitedly said.

Stonegate looked aside for a moment, and said, “The cause of the event is under investigation. But I stand by my comments that we must always be on guard to protect liberty.” Stonegate then waved and entered the building.

“Perhaps some cryptic comments from Tallahassee,” the reporter said in front of the grassy yard. “Now back to you in New York.”

I turned away from the TV, and tried to call Terese again. Her phone rang, and rang again. “C’mon Terese, answer the damn phone,” I said out loud. But rings three and four echoed in my ear, followed by her voice, “Hello this is Terese, I’m not here right now...”

I could only stare at my phone.

Still feeling weak, and tired, I ventured out of my office to the bathroom. When I got back from the bathroom after trying to wash my face, and wash the sweat away from my forehead, I saw a medical center security guard accompanied by a Philadelphia City Police Officer at my office door.

The security guard looked at me with his eyes wide open. The City Policeman said, “Sir, excuse me but are you Dr. Anthony West?”

I nodded.

“Are you the husband of Ms. Terese West?” he asked.

My mouth dropped and I half nodded.

“Sir, can we go into your office for a moment?” he said.

Chapter 8

The policeman motioned for me sit down, and I slowly took a chair as he sat across from me. The security guard, looking aside, stood by the door. “Sir, I don’t know if you heard, but there was an incident on board a train from Philadelphia bound for New York this morning,” he said.

“Yes, I saw it on TV,” I could only say.

“Sir, your wife Terese was on that train, and I regret to tell you that she was fatally injured in the explosion. We don’t know everything, but she was dead when the rescue workers reached her area of the train this morning,” he said slowly.

“Are you sure,” was all I could muster.

“Yes sir, I’m sorry,” the policeman said continuing to look at me trying to offer some support.

Chapter 9

I don't know how much time elapsed. Somewhere from deep inside me came a moan, which gradually swept over me, and then overtook me. I gradually cried out with the volume of the cry growing as I sank down. I fell into the policeman's lap, and he held me. I called out, "No", with the volume growing, and then fading. I collapsed into him, and he held me. I don't know how long I was there.

Finally, he said, "Sir, do you want me to take you somewhere? "

I said nothing.

He said, "Sir, do you want to go to the emergency room here. They will be able to help you out."

I've been in this business long enough to know when the police want to settle things, they take you either to their institution or to mine. I also have been in this business long enough to know that no matter what --when the police bring you to the emergency room that it's not a good sign.

"No," I said, "I'll be OK. Just give me a few minutes to get myself together. Thank you."

“Are you sure you’ll be all right?” he said. “Yes,” I said, “just give me some time”. I shook his hand and thanked him. The police officer got up very slowly, and looked at the security guard. They both looked back at me.

The security guard, then thankfully nodded toward the door, and said fairly loudly, “I’m so sorry Dr. West. I’ll be around if you need anything.” The second sentence was directed at the police officer. They both left, and I sank into the back of my chair. I stared ahead, and didn’t really see anything. It was hard to notice the walls of my office, or time. I stared.

Barbara knocked on the door, and when I didn’t answer, she came in. Entering, she said, “I just thought I would check on you.” And then looking at me she blurted out, “You look like crap.”

I lifted my head, and told her, “Terese was on that train, and she was killed. The police just told me.”

“Oh God, I’m so sorry,” Barbara said, and she came over and held me. I sank into her, finding it hard to lift up my own weight.

“Do you know what happened?” she said.

“No, just that she died,” I replied. “The newsmen are talking more and more like it was a terrorist attack,” she said.

“Murderers, that’s all they are. Murderers,” I uttered, gritting my teeth.

“Look, I should do something for you,” Barbara said. “Do you want a xanax, a drink, a glass of water, anything?” she asked.

“I think for now, I’ll take the water,” I finally said.

After a few seconds, she said, “I’ll be right back.” She emerged with a coffee cup with water in it, which tasted bitter, and cold. I only remembered thinking how appropriate that was.

She sat there looking at me for several minutes, and then finally said, “Look, I should take you home.”

I pleaded with her not to do that. “That would only make things worse,” I said. “There’s nobody there.”

Barbara looked confused, and at a loss, but refused to move.

Finally, I said, “Look, just leave me here for a while. I’d rather be alone, and just get my bearings for a bit.” She still refused to move. Finally, I gave her a half smile, and again said, “Look, I mean it, I’ll be OK, I just have to find gravity again.”

She sat still. I looked at her, and Barbara finally said. "Look Andy, I'll check back in an hour, and you'd better call the ward if you need something." I reassured her, with all the strength I could muster, and she finally got up to leave.

"Andy, I'm so sorry," Barbara said again, and wiped a tear from her eye.

"Me too," I said.

I sat in the chair for an hour, maybe two. It was hard to tell. Finally, I got so uncomfortable, that I had to get up. Looking over to the TV in my office, I walked over to it and turned it on. The station continued to show news about the train attack, and I switched channels. That station had news about the attack as well. I resigned myself to it, and felt pulled to the reporting of events.

“There are now six people confirmed dead,” and the number wounded in the attack has risen to twenty-nine. Three are hospitalized in serious condition in a Manhattan Hospital,” the news anchor stated gravely. “Again, let me summarize what we know. This morning, on a train from Philadelphia bound for New York, there was an explosion in a middle car on the train. A terrorist group from the Middle East, calling themselves “The Quest” claimed responsibility in a phone call to Al Jazeera, and now to CNN. We interviewed one of the passengers wounded on the train, and here is a tape of that interview taken as the survivor left the hospital emergency room.”

The camera switched to a moving image of a young man with his arm in a sling, and scratches all over his face.

“Sir, can you tell me what happened,” the reporter asked hurriedly.

The man stopped, looked at the camera, and then at the reporter. He looked away and then said, "Everything was going normally. We were heading into the tunnel going into Manhattan. I was sitting towards the back of the train car. Then suddenly, this young woman stood up in the aisle, and took off her coat, and she was wearing some kind of vest with wires all over it. She screamed, "Allahu Akbar", and then there was a loud explosion, and everything went dark. Everything seemed to be flying around at first, and I was dazed. My left shoulder was hit, and I was holding it, and then blood came into my eyes. It took me a minute or two to figure out what was happening, and then I got up. I saw light at the back, and walked toward the light."

"Are you badly hurt, Sir," the reporter asked. "No just a busted shoulder, and some cuts. They tell me I'll be OK. I hope they get the bastards behind this, though," he said and looked at the camera. "That girl, with the bomb...she was so calm. She was so young..." he said, with his voice trailing off. He looked down, and the camera moved in on his face. His eyes were quite distant, and his mouth was caught wide open, as if gasping for air when there was none.

The camera switched back to the reporter who looked at the camera, saying, “So there we have an eyewitness, who says that a female terrorist detonated a suicide bomb she was wearing as a vest on board the train this morning. Again, six people were killed, and we assume that includes the terrorist, but we have no clear word on that.”

The anchorman came back on the screen, and I shut off the TV. I had enough. “At least, it was probably quick, all of a sudden for Terese,” I thought, and then couldn’t believe I was using the past tense talking about her. I threw the TV remote against the chair, and stared out the window.

After another twenty minutes or so, I walked back to my desk and sat down. I stared out the window, and then at the floor. Finally, I walked down to the inpatient unit to reassure Barbara, and to tell her that I was going home.

“Barbara, I’m going to go home. I have to figure something out...Thanks, though,” I finally said.

She looked at me determinedly. “Andy, you better call me if you need anything,” she said. I agreed, but we both knew that I wouldn’t call and that there was really nothing she could do.

I walked down the bland hallways, which now seemed only empty, with the fluorescent lights ringing in my ears and eyes. The light outside the elevator said “down”. As I got in, the doors closed behind me.

Chapter 10

I walked through the halls of the hospital, and there may have been people there, but I don't remember them. The halls stopped, and I stepped out into the street, and I was struck by the bright sunshine which shook me. I thought, "I should have been there. I should have done something. She didn't have to die alone. I could have saved her..." As soon as the thought "saved her" came to mind, I again thought of The Oracle. "Interesting choice of words," I said out loud to myself.

I turned the corner, and was met by a small crowd. Two TV stations positioned cameras on the corner, and as I emerged from behind the hospital, the small crowd of reporters rushed me. "Dr. West?" one reporter said. "Do you have any comments about the tragedy today?" another said.

It was unbelievable to me how quickly the news spread, but I suppose I shouldn't have been so shocked. The terrorist attack was big news, and the local news stations wanted their piece of flesh or the "local angle" as they called it.

"Dr. West, we're sorry for your loss," another said loudly. "Do you have any comment?"

I stopped and looked at the camera, and just started talking. “These people are not terrorists. They are not after any type of political fight. They’re murderers. They murder women. My wife was a nurse, and worked to improve the health of other women. That’s why she was going to New York, to present her ideas at a nursing conference. That’s the kind of person these murderers kill. They hide behind young impressionable people, and say they have some kind of political agenda. That’s crap. They are just angry narcissists. They’re just murderers. “

“And, I have just one thing to say to them,” I said, and then I paused, not sure what the one thing I wanted to say.

“I have just one thing to say to them,” and I looked directly into the camera. “I forgive you.”

Chapter 11

I don't really remember driving home that night.

The evening news, of course, opened with the story of the suicide bombing aboard the train to New York, but then quickly cut to my tirade in front of the hospital, ending with the line "I forgive you." I suppose the emotion of the grieving husband was too good not to use as a lead on television, and that formed the basis of much of the rest of the newscast.

I didn't care.

I lost my wife and it didn't matter much to me what they said, what they did, or what they planned. My life was turned upside down, and the most important part of it was gone. Forever. For the television news people, though, it was drama, and they wanted to capture it, to bottle it to present in 50 second videos surrounded by ten second sound bytes from newscasters and "experts". Of course, murder and terrorism is something everyone has an opinion about, and the news networks set out to prove that point. Terese was gone, but every time the TV was on there was yet more analysis and opinion about what happened, with the same tired images repeatedly flashing across the

cathode rays filling my living room. But this time, I, and my tirade was one of the fifty second bursts of drama filling the news and my television.

I didn't turn it off because I couldn't move.

"Governor Stonegate will be giving a speech tonight on the terrorist attack in New York" droned on one newscaster. That was followed by misty crystal ball predictions of what she would say, and how she should "handle" the situation. All I remember thinking was "This is not her situation to "handle", buddy. My wife was killed, not anybody in her family."

Still, I sat there, in a daze in front of the TV.

"Governor Stonegate has just given her speech to a large crowd of supporters in Tampa" a bright young man with perfect hair said. "She chose to speak in front of the Tampa train station, which gave a dark backdrop to the day's events," he intoned. "We have highlights of her talk which we can present to you now," he said. A gust of wind blew up, but his hair didn't move.

"Today, terrorists struck again in America," Stonegate began. "Have we not learned anything over the last eight years? Are we better prepared for these attacks than we were eight years ago? Is America any safer now

than we were before? Can any American, anywhere, rest in their bed tonight feeling that our national security is under control, that we are free from fear?” Stonegate went on. She stopped for several moments to look to her right and then to her left. “No,” someone in the crowd shouted, followed by more calls of “No” from all over the crowd.

“On the way to New York today, a nurse, who dedicated her life to helping others, was killed by a group that did not care about her or her life. They use murder as a weapon against us. They want to use fear as a weapon against us. I am not afraid to take them on,” she said loudly. “We are not afraid”, someone started yelling, and the rest of the crowd began to chant, “We are not afraid; we are not afraid; we are not afraid.”

“That woman, Terese West, is gone. America will miss her and the others who died on that train. Terese West will not be at work tomorrow to care for the sick, to educate those who seek nothing else than to help people at the most challenging point of their lives. She will not be there,” Stonegate suddenly said quietly. The crowd quieted and stood still.

I, however, looked up and sat up straight. I couldn't believe that all of this was happening. My wife left

this morning to go to a conference, and now she is dead and somehow in the middle of a presidential campaign.

“Her husband, Dr. Andrew West, is a good Christian man,” she went on. All I can remember thinking was that I’ve been called a lot of things, but that was never one of them.

“He was able to find in his heart in the midst of this personal and national tragedy the strength to forgive these terrorists, these murderers. This is the personal and religious strength on which America is built,” she said, with her voice growing louder. “He is a strong man,” she said.

All I remember thinking was “Honey, you have no idea what this feels like, and right now, I do not feel like a strong man.”

Stonegate went on, with her voice rising in tone and vigor, “He found the strength to forgive,” she said. “But, I cannot forgive...and I cannot forget this cowardly act perpetrated on this train, and perpetrated on America. I will not forgive, and I will not rest until those who are responsible are brought to justice, and punished for their attack, for their murders, and for their cowardice.” The crowd cheered. “Go get ‘em Stonewall,” somebody yelled.

Governor Stonegate then tensed her lower jaw, and

lowered her head. She said, "I will not rest until the people who planned and carried out this attack are brought to justice. As your President, I will make sure that the intelligence community works, that security is tighter, and that no man will ever have to worry about his wife being cut down and murdered again. As your president, I will make sure that security agencies will work together, but more than that, I will make sure that all foreign powers and foreign groups know that the United States of America will not lie down and be attacked. I do not forgive them. I relish the opportunity to take the fight to them!" she yelled raising her fist into the air.

The crowd acted like it had been thrown red meat. "Stonewall Stonegate...Stonewall Stonegate...Stonewall Stonegate," they began chanting. Governor Stonegate simply stared to the right and to the left nodding with a determined look in her eye.

I was amazed.

The television cut back to the man with the great hair, and he said, "In her speech, Governor Stonegate went on to say that in her campaign some criticized her for focusing on defense and security, but she said "There is no more important role for the American government than to

protect its citizens.” Her words seemed to reach the ears of this partisan crowd, and seemed to energize them. The Governor seemed to touch on some of the fear we have discussed today, and faced it with a combative tone. Now back to you,” the man with the great hair said.

The anchor then said that Vice President Mooring also had a statement on the attack, and the television then switched to a middle aged woman reporter with a microphone. “Vice President Mooring just emerged from a fund raiser in Baltimore, here at the Lord Baltimore Hotel,” she said. We have his words as well as some comments as he was leaving the fund raising event. Here is what he told us earlier tonight,” she said.

“The president and I have been in communication all day about the attack on board the train in New York this morning,” Mooring said. “The president and I deeply regret the attacks and the loss of life,” he said trying to express some measure of compassion for the cameras. Our intelligence reports show that the attack was carried out by a single young woman, and the group ‘The Quest’ claims responsibility for this murderous attack. The president and I can both assure you that those who are responsible will be brought to justice, and they will see their actions

punished. We have no evidence that this attack was sponsored by any state but rather it seems it was carried out by a renegade group seeking to establish a name and garner attention to their cause. Simply put, they are murderers. We will find them, and we will prosecute them. America is a great place, a safe place, and we will ensure it stays that way,” Mooring told his audience.

The fundraising event was a formal affair, and Mooring was speaking in a tuxedo, in calm measured tones. While I suppose he wanted to reassure his supporters, the camera showed a diffident side. He seemed aloof, and in his tuxedo, distant.

The anchor returned to the television, and said, “Then, after his fundraising event, Vice President Mooring again talked with our reporters.”

The television next showed Mooring leaving the building, being immediately confronted by a group of reporters and cameras. “Mr. Vice President,” the woman with the microphone called out, “can you comment on the attack today in New York for us.”

“Yes,” Mooring started. He was still wearing his tuxedo, but now was without the bow tie and his feigned casual look made him look even more disconnected from

the rest of the television audience. “The attack this morning was a terrible tragedy, and our hearts go out to the victims’ families and to all those who are recovering from the attack in the hospital. Right now, our nation’s resources are dedicated to finding, and prosecuting those responsible for planning this terrible attack,” he said.

“Do you have any leads you can share with us,” the woman reporter said. Mooring stopped and stared earnestly, “There is nothing I can share with you now, but we expect arrests shortly,” he said.

“That’s the comments from Vice President Mooring,” the reporter said. “The president has been silent so far, but official statements from the White House echo the concern for loss of life, and say they are determined to bring those responsible to justice.”

I saw myself on TV again with my “I forgive you” statement highlighted again and again. More earnest looking TV reporters and overweight television commentators discussed the attack, and my comments. I had to turn it off.

The house fell silent. I felt again that no one was coming home. Walking over to our bedroom, I couldn’t go in. I lay down on the couch, and prayed for sleep.

Morning finally came and I continued to roll back and forth on the couch until the sun seemed to stream in through the windows. I finally got up, tired of being tired and tired of trying to unsuccessfully sleep. I called the hospital, and told them I couldn't make it there today.

Then looking out the window, I saw my street filled with TV vans and a police cruiser with two cops who looked bored. It occurred to me that they were all waiting for me. I was news.

They could all go to hell.

Chapter 12

Then, the phone started ringing. Somehow, the news outlets had my phone number, and they all wanted a comment. “How could you forgive the terrorists?” one asked. “Do you consider yourself a good Christian? Would Christianity defeat Islam?” asked another. I wanted to explain that the Crusades were over centuries ago, but I just hung up instead. The phone kept ringing, and I pulled it out of the wall. I was in no mood to be someone’s entertainment, to be someone’s story.

The reporters still camped across the street, and the police cruiser was still there doing little. I was grateful for the presence of the police, though. I was afraid that someone would try to reenact the Crusades in my front yard if they weren’t there.

I didn't know what to do.

I couldn't really leave the house, and I didn't know what I would do even if I could. But, I didn't want to just sit quietly inside the house all by myself, and so finally, I turned on the TV. The events of the previous day were still featured in big stories across the news networks. To my astonishment, I was news. My tirade stating "I forgive the terrorists" was featured in every newscast, and all the talking heads were spouting off.

Most reporters were praising my "insight and courage" to speak of forgiveness after the tragedy that had befallen my wife. The events were continual fodder for the presidential candidates.

Stonegate's crowds today were even bigger, and her rhetoric was ever fierier. "America has been attacked, again," she called out to the crowd on TV. "We were not ready, again. Are we going to pursue the same course, again?" she called out to the crowd, who yelled back "No, No". "America will have a clear choice in the election in two weeks," she called back. "We have to decide if we will accept America under attack, or a strong America which will not be threatened. Americans, you must decide what you want," she said, staring at the camera for the last sentence, and then looking at the crowd. They responded loudly, calling out "Stonewall Stonegate, Stonewall Stonegate." The candidate, rather than smiling, looked at the crowd with a look of fierce determination. The beauty queen could be resolute, and indeed looked stony. The crowd kept chanting as the story went back to the television anchors.

"Vice President Mooring cancelled his campaign events for this morning in order to confer with the President," a staffer told the television camera.

“We are working to bring the perpetrators of this crime to justice, and we will hold them responsible,” the Vice President said. Mooring continued to try to be presidential, or at least Vice Presidential, and this was in sharp contrast to the crowds surrounding Stonegate who seemed to be waiting for red meat to be thrown in their direction. The underdog, who advocated for a stronger national defense and beefed up security, was capitalizing on this event, the death of my wife, and on my “forgive them” statement.

My beeper went off, and I reflexively grabbed it. After carrying a beeper from the hospital for decades, it was simply a reflex to attend to it immediately. I wasn’t on call, and I wasn’t in the hospital, but that didn’t stop me from grabbing it, and it occurred to me that I never removed it from my belt after dressing yesterday morning. I looked at the number, and it was the phone number for the inpatient psychiatry unit.

I was almost grateful for the distraction, and plugged in my phone and called the unit. Barbara answered the phone, and said, “Andy, I’m so sorry. I was worried about you.”

I choked out, “Thanks, I’m OK”.

“I doubt that,” Barbara said quickly. “You’ve made quite a stir from your comments yesterday, and we’ve had a few reporters sniffing around here, along with some phone calls to the hospital. I tossed them out on their ear,” Barbara said.

“Way to go girl,” I responded. “There is a squadron of reporters across from my driveway, and I think they want me to go out and fight the Crusades, or lecture on Christianity,” I said.

“Or both,” Barbara said.

“Look, Andy, do you need anything,” Barbara finally asked.

“I have no idea,” I said after a few moments of thinking about it. “I think I’m OK. I haven’t changed clothes. I haven’t moved much, and I haven’t done much of anything,” I said.

“Sounds about right,” she said. “Have you eaten anything,” she asked.

“I forgot,” I said.

“Well walk to your refrigerator and put something in your mouth,” she quickly said. “Should I come out there,” she asked.

I told her no, that I would rather sit and think, and I told her I didn't think she could get through the television vans with their antennae up across the street anyhow.

“OK, but call me this afternoon. And eat something,” she said.

I assured her that I would, and hung up the phone. Again, I looked out my window and stared at the television vans blocking the street.

I was surprised at the amount of attention my simple sentence, “I forgive you” gathered. I had become the symbol of the attack, and that statement seemed to push me forward to the front of Christian values. I wasn't quite sure why I said it, but I was sure it wasn't because I was at the front of Christian values. I knew I was angry, and I knew that Terese had been lost in a senseless attack that cost others their lives too. I knew I was angry, and that I was being sucked down into the quicksand of anger and despair and hatred. That was grabbing me, pulling me down and I could feel being swallowed by the array of negative emotions. I was looking for a branch to hang onto, anything to cling to that was different than the hatred and despair that I knew would bury me – and still could bury me.

As I was walking out of the hospital yesterday, I remembered the Amish community which was not far from my old home in Lancaster County. On a terrible fall morning a couple of years ago, a desperate man barged into one of their one room school houses, and chained together a group of small Amish girls, and then shot them before he shot himself. The whole community was dumbstruck. The Amish, of course, stood not only against the modern inventions that would remove them from their religion, but they seemed to symbolize peace and tranquility in this ever more crazy and desperate world. For this unspeakable tragedy to happen to them was not only tragic but unfathomable. They responded by making it clear that they forgave the shooter. Members of the Amish community went to his wife's house, and members of the community went to the shooter's funeral. "We're all sinners," they said. "If we cannot forgive, how do we expect ourselves, in our own lives to be forgiven? We must work to forgive to move ahead, to move toward our own salvation," they said. I was surprised as was just about everyone else in our community. But, I thought they were probably right.

Hatred tears at one's soul, and gradually buries you in the quicksand of past regrets and personal slights. I could feel the quicksand at my feet, gradually creeping up.

I knew hatred and despair were pulling me, and I was close to being snatched by them. I knew that I could not accept that.

I could not believe that I could have prevented the attack. I could not believe that the murder had any real purpose. I could not believe that Terese's death would have no meaning. When I started talking to the reporters, all I could feel was anger and hate. I knew I had to do something. I knew I had to move somehow out of the quicksand that was swallowing me. As I walked out into the light, I could see The Oracle's whiskers pointing at me. As he told me, I had to find another way around. So, I said "I forgive you."

It was a different thing to say, I suppose, but I certainly did not feel it, and I quickly moved away from the camera. Little did I know I would become the signature TV sound byte of the event, and even more shocking, that I would be placed front and center of Governor Stonegate's presidential campaign.

Now, I wasn't hating, or forgiving. I was numb. I looked out my front window at the circus of news vans with their satellite dishes reaching to the sky. The police cruiser was still there, and the policemen still looked bored. I envied them.

Chapter 13

The next day seemed to come more quickly, and I knew that I slept a little after eating a sandwich that night. Barbara beeped me again, and I called her back, and could actually talk a little.

I sat on the couch and stared, and knew that I had to do something. However, I had no idea what to do. So, I turned on the TV, knowing somehow that was not the right thing to do either. But, I had no energy for anything else.

The news anchor seemed perpetually concerned about the election, but I found it hard to focus. “The latest polls show that the race for president has narrowed,” he said. Vice President Mooring lost ground to Governor Stonegate, who now trails him by only four percentage points. However, Mooring enjoys comfortable leads in New York and California, and is still ahead in the swing states of Pennsylvania and Ohio. Governor Stonegate, though, is going on the attack, and continually swinging out her themes of national defense and security. Her crowds seem to be growing daily. Now we go to our correspondent with the Stonegate campaign...” and the camera switched to the earnest young man with the great hair.

“Governor Stonegate’s campaign was given a boost by the recent polls. Over the last month and a half, she was trailing by eight to eleven points, depending on the poll, but this latest poll, showing her trailing by only four points breathed some new energy into her campaign with only ten days left until the election. Stonegate continues to loudly address crowds,” he said.

Then the TV screen filled itself with a picture of the governor, saying, “We cannot simply lie down and accept this. We will not be victimized. We will fight back.” With each sentence, the crowd chanted, “No”. The beauty queen always attracted crowds as a curiosity, but now, with her invigorated attacks, the crowds were chanting in return. She worked them, and allowed them to chant before each of her sentences, and their chanting seemed to grow louder as the rally progressed.

“Governor Stonegate’s campaign manager spoke to me just a few minutes ago,” the young man said. “We feel that there has been a momentum shift in the campaign,” he said. “Americans are beginning to listen to our message about the imperative of actively preparing a national defense, and fighting back against our enemies,” he said.

“The Mooring campaign still enjoys a fund raising advantage,” said the anchor, and we now go to their campaign event. The attractive young woman reporter said that she just concluded an exclusive interview with the Mooring campaign manager, breathlessly reporting this as if his campaign manager wouldn’t dive in front of any camera within a hundred yards. “What do you make of the recent attack and its effect on Vice President Mooring’s campaign,” the woman asked.

“At a time like this, Americans need dependable leadership, someone who has been through troubled times and can steer the rudder of the ship of state. America knows they can trust Vice President Mooring,” he said.

The TV then showed parts of the latest speech from Mooring. He was standing on a stage in the south someplace, and a huge American flag was behind him.

Mooring gestured to the crowd, and rolled up the sleeves of his starched white shirt to below his elbows, and wasn’t wearing a tie.

His wife was with him, costumed in a red dress at his side looking up at him with open eyes. Her hair didn’t move any more than the young male reporter’s hair following Stonegate.

“At a time like this, we need stable leadership,” Mooring calmly said. “America knows who they can trust,” and then he smiled as the crowd politely applauded and waved signs showing his face with the flag in the background.

The young female reporter re-emerged on the screen, and asked about the latest poll showing the race narrowing to only a four point Mooring lead. The campaign manager smiled, and said, “We’re still in the lead, and we listen to the only poll that counts – the one on Election Day.”

I gotta move, I thought to myself. I took a shower, and then with a towel wrapped around me forced myself to walk into the bedroom to change clothes.

Terese’s makeup was on her dresser. Notes from the talk she would give were next to her jewelry box. Her calendar was open to the week, and the responsibilities planned for today.

“I wish I had known,” I said out loud. “I should have been able to do something to stop this, to control this,” I shouted to the mirror. But, as soon as those words left my mouth I knew the idea was stupid. The grey beard of the Oracle seemed to appear before me, pointing in my direction. “You can’t control everything,” I said to myself.

“Maybe... I should learn to forgive,” I thought.

I looked out the front door, and the news vans were still there. "I've got to run the gauntlet," I thought.

Chapter 14

I dressed, and opened the front door. Immediately, there was a rush of microphones and cameras coming toward me, blocking my driveway.

“Dr. West, a word please” said the more polite reporter. The less polite ones began to push and shouted questions.

“Do you still forgive the terrorists,” he asked.

“Yes,” I said softly, but I still wasn’t sure that was true.

“How can you forgive the terrorists who killed your wife?” another asked.

“How can I not if I want to move on? You can be consumed by hate, and I refuse to do that,” I said.

Another shouted, “What do you think of Governor Stonegate’s comments on this?”

“She’s entitled to her opinion,” I said.

By then, the police arrived, and one officer said to me, “Sir, are you all right?” I told him that I wanted to move my car and drive away. The policeman ushered me into my car, and the questions kept coming, being shouted all the more vigorously as I got into my car, and then slammed my door. The cameras kept rolling as the police cleared a path.

I hoped that feeding the frenzy would quiet them a bit, but I had no idea if that was the case. I escaped the television vans, and my neighborhood, and directed my car to Philadelphia State, more out of habit than anything else.

From the computer at work, I made the arrangements for Terese’s funeral. Her body had been pulverized by the explosion, the police told me, and luckily they did not ask me to identify her. I arranged to have her remains cremated, and then have a church service. The pastor at our church was very sympathetic, and helpful. He said that he would gladly handle the arrangements for the church service. He also said, “Dr. West, I can’t tell you how touched I was at your willingness to offer forgiveness at a time like this. You’re an inspiration to us all.”

I shook my head, and said, “I don’t feel much like an inspiration these days. But, thank you for your help in getting together Terese’s funeral service. It helps me to have one less thing to worry about.”

The pastor again thanked me, and repeatedly told me to call him if I needed anything. The one thing I needed though would never return.

Two days later, entering the church, I was amazed at how full it was.

I was not surprised to see the reporters outside and the TV cameras at the ready to try to capture some drama, some tears, and some piece of human emotion to feed the television news cycle. But, when I went into the church, I was surprised to see so many former students. Groups of students I taught as well as groups of Terese’s students were there and all warmly expressed condolences and their best wishes. In addition, many colleagues of mine came and offered simple encouragement.

Barbara was there as well, and took my arm, and said quietly, “This is the hard part, you just have to get through today,” she said. She walked me to the front of the church, where there was an abundant array of flowers. “Did you see this one,” she asked. I frankly hadn’t read any of the cards at all. In the corner of the sanctuary, there was a collection of white lilies, with the card reading, “With my sincere condolences – Amanda Stonegate.” I expected a TV screen to drop down, or at least a few reporters to jump out from behind the lilies, but there was no one in the corner of the church but Barbara and me.

I took my seat, and could feel the TV cameras, and the eyes of the whole church boring into my shoulder blades as I entered the front pew.

The service seemed to go on for an eternity, with the preacher commenting on lives taken too soon, and how none of us know the extent of our lives, which I expect was standard fare for a funeral. But, then he began talking about the power of forgiveness, and what a gift that is to all of us. “A central tenant of the Christian faith, forgiveness enables all of us to go on, as Dr. West so eloquently told us,” he said, looking down at me. The TV cameras were rolling in the church, and focused in on me. All I felt was uncomfortable.

Finally, the funeral ended and seemingly everyone there came up to me and shook my hand and assured me that if I needed anything, that I should call them. Of course, we all knew that I wouldn't call any of them. But their good wishes, often expressed through tearful eyes were indeed comforting. Barbara was right. I just needed to get through this.

Barbara followed me home, and we shared a cup of coffee. I brought the urn with Terese's ashes with me. The urn, however, was of no comfort whatsoever.

Ashes did not remind me of the vibrant, caring, funny and beautiful woman she was. I knew I had to get rid of those ashes, which only symbolized death to me.

So, after Barbara left, I sprinkled her ashes in our garden in the back yard she loved so much. Having her close to me and close to the things she loved seemed to matter more than holding the urn in my hand.

Inside, the house was quiet. The reporters extracted their pound of flesh at the funeral, and they taped their sound bytes for the day. The neighborhood was emptied of any news vans or antennae looking up to the sky. A couple of neighbors dropped by, and then left, again urging me to call them for "anything", but neither of us could figure out what that could be.

I closed the door, and the house was again quiet. The quiet this time, though was not peaceful, it was simply empty.

Sitting down, I stared out the window, and ate one of the sandwiches a neighbor delivered to my door earlier that morning. The house was quiet. My life was empty.

I had to fill the quiet house with something, and so I turned on the TV. Again, I felt drawn to the news channel.

“With only six days until the general election, the race is tightening,” the anchor said. Vice President Mooring holds a three point lead over Governor Stonegate, but more voters, five percent now, list themselves as undecided.”

They followed with the speech from Vice President Mooring, who was speaking before a large and polite crowd. They were waving signs, and he was waving back. He then said, “We all have work to do. We have to continue to build this country, to commit ourselves to the task at hand. Over the next six days of this campaign, we have much work to do as well. We have to knock on doors, work the phones, and talk with our neighbors to insure that what we all have worked for goes forward.” The crowd cheered, and he smiled, again.

“We now go to Governor Stonegate’s gathering in Cincinnati,” the anchor said. The young man with the great hair began to explain that Ohio was crucial to the Stonegate campaign. “The Buckeye State is still in play, with most of the polls here saying both candidates are dead even with each other. The Stonegate campaign hopes to energize voters in the next couple of days and capture this battleground state. Here is what the candidate said earlier in the day,” and then the cameras switched to Stonegate standing in front of a National Guard Amory downtown.

“America can be, and must be great again,” Stonegate began. “But we can only be great again, if we refuse to cower to murderers who attack our homeland. A Stonegate administration will not lie down before terror.”

Governor Stonegate paused, and looked over the crowd, then she set her lower jaw and said, “The Stonegate administration will not lie still and idly let them attack us. We will not be victimized. We will fight back, as Americans have always done,” she cried out. The large crowd cheered, and waved. Stonegate looked earnestly from side to side of the crowd, and then stared into the cameras. “America has to make sure we make the right decision in six days,” she said. Then the crowd began chanting, “Stonewall Stonegate, Stonewall Stonegate, Stonewall Stonegate...”

I turned the channel to the local Philadelphia news station, and after a downtown fire, they displayed prominent video footage of me walking into the church for Terese's funeral, followed by footage from the preacher's sermon featuring his comment, "Forgiveness enables all of us to go on, as Dr. West so eloquently told us."

I just shook my head, and turned off the TV.

Suddenly, I felt exhausted, and this time when I went to bed, I quickly fell asleep. It was late the next day when I awoke. Looking out the window, I saw a cold, brisk November day, and now, I was hungry. I looked outside, and no one was there. The neighborhood was empty and so was I.

Chapter 15

Stumbling around the house, I managed to get a shower that next day. It did seem like an accomplishment, and afterwards, I actually felt hungry, and after examining the contents of the refrigerator, settled on three hot dogs for dinner. Outside, the sun was going down, and the amber lights on the horizon meeting the sunset were reflected in the oranges and golds of the tree outside our window. When we moved into our house, that tree was much smaller, and we almost lost it in a winter ice storm that took away the largest branch several years ago. But, the tree stubbornly fought on, and continued to grow. It was a bit misshapen, but the branch that broke away was over the street in front of our house, and because it continued to provide shade for the walk and the driveway on the other side, we let it grow. Or, maybe it was because I was too lazy or busy to cut it, we let it grow. But, in any event, it lingered in place, and it was now shedding its leaves all over our driveway.

That misshaped tree was still there and as a small breeze blew by, it seemed to wave at me with its one good branch, with new sprouts going out at different angles.

The sunset was beautiful, with a combination of light reds, joining the blue of the sky.

I stood motionless in the window watching it for a half hour. Gradually, the colors of the sky were gone, and the tree remained, losing some its leaves, but hanging onto the gold ones. The winter would again be hard for that tree, but it would survive the winter, and in the spring, it would again blossom. Some of the new sprouts would try to reach over to the street where there was more room, and some would be swallowed by the remaining good branches. But, it would remain, fighting against the winds and the cold of winter.

I remember feeling glad that I was too lazy to cut it down. I walked outside and took a good look at it, and in the dark resolved to do something. I hadn't done anything at all, all day. I grabbed a rake, and started raking some of the leaves into the curb. The colorful leaves would be collected sometime that week by whoever did that sort of thing. I never paid much attention to that before. But, now it was comforting taking care of the leaves that had fallen away, and making sure they received some care. Maybe it was just the physical activity of moving about, but taking care of the leaves and looking at that tree did give me some stirrings of life, and perhaps some hope. I was beginning to understand why Terese loved being outside, and loved working in her garden so much.

Going back inside, there was not even the sound of the wind to break my reverie, and I reflexively turned on the TV. It was good to have some sound in the house. Again, with the presidential election only days away, the news of that race was front and center on the cable news stations.

“The race continues to narrow,” the anchor said. “With only days left before the election, Vice President Mooring holds only a three point lead in most of the polls. And, some states that seemed secure in his corner, including Ohio and even Pennsylvania now seem up for grabs. Don, can you show us that on your map?”

The anchor switched over to Don, and Don was standing in front of a map of the United States with more colors than the tree in front of our house. Don was busy explaining what all the colors meant, but I lost Don in the midst of his explanation. But, Don was certainly enthralled with his map, and seemed to do his own choreography as he waved his arms up and down, making the map do things, and danced in front of it.

At the end of the ballet, that I still couldn't follow, Don switched back to the first map. It was a map decorated with republican red and democratic blue. The edges of both sides of the map were blue, but the red seemed to be stretching into it, just like this evening's sunset.

“Vice President Mooring continues to hold big leads in California as well as in the democratic strongholds of Massachusetts, New York, Maryland and New Jersey. As you can see, Ohio and Pennsylvania are now no longer blue and seem to be up for grabs as the campaign winds down,” Don shouted to his screen. Don seemed to get excited again, and once more waved his arms around the great lakes, and danced again, landed on his feet, and said, “and now back to you.”

“Don, thank you for that great explanation,” the anchor said. “I’m sure we’ll be keeping you busy in the days to come.” I only thought that Don had better stoke up on some caffeine to continue to dance like that.

“And now, we bring you the latest update from the Mooring campaign,” and the anchor switched scenes to the female reporter who had been tirelessly riding the Mooring plane. She stood in front of a huge American flag with more red, white and blue bunting around it, and a band in back of her was playing, “Happy days are here again.” I only felt how inappropriate that song was for me.

“Vice President Mooring continues to gather large crowds at his events, and his operatives are working to keep them excited. The key, they feel is to work on the “Get out

the vote” effort on election day to capitalize on the strength they feel is somewhat hidden and certain to come out to the polls on election day. Mooring’s campaign manager discussed this with me, and here are his observations,” she said. “Yes, we are optimistic,” the campaign manager said. “We know that Americans all across this great country will recognize the work that Vice President Mooring accomplished to build this country to the place we enjoy today.”

The reporter asked, “Do you feel that the public is concerned about any more terror attacks?”

He quickly answered, “Yes, I know that they are concerned about that. And, especially in these times, it is important to choose someone who has a long record, years of experience, and someone we know will have a steady hand in times of stress or even an emergency. No one is more prepared for the presidency than the Vice President.”

The attractive woman reporter then looked up and said, “The Mooring campaign continues to follow their playbook, advocating what they call ‘the stability and the experience’ of the Vice President.”

Mooring then emerged from somewhere deep in the red, white and blue bunting, and was wearing a blue suit with a white shirt and red tie. He also had a flag pin in his label, but it was redundant. He was a flag standing in front of a flag. He gave a broad smile, and the band started playing “Happy Days are here again” as the crowd all waved flags of the same size and shape in the air. “My goodness, what a coincidence that they all have the same type of flag to wave,” I said out loud to the TV.

The attractive woman reporter then came back on the screen with the band playing in the background saying, “Vice President Mooring plans stops in Florida, Georgia and Alabama over the next day and a half. Few of us will get much sleep over the next three days,” she said looking mournfully at the camera. The anchor tried to sound sympathetic, and was very grateful for her hard work, he said. I thought she could probably squeeze in a nap if only she could get away from that band.

“The Stonegate campaign seems to be growing in excitement as these last days passed,” the anchor observed. “The Stonegate campaign, which once seemed moribund, down eleven points in the polls, is now surging with renewed life. We now go to our reporter with the Stonegate campaign in Cleveland.”

Next on the screen appeared Governor Stonegate, walking into a crowd of people shaking hands, and stopping to talk with people in the large group. She looked at several people earnestly, and nodded her head intently. The camera panned back, and the young man with the great hair appeared and began to talk. “Today, in Cleveland, the Stonegate campaign was met by large crowds of people, who seemed enthusiastic and were quite loud in supporting her message. Here are some scenes from her rally earlier today in downtown Cleveland.”

Governor Stonegate appeared on the TV, and screams of “Stonewall Stonegate ...Stonewall Stonegate...Stonewall Stonegate” echoed in the background. She smiled briefly at the crowd, and then began speaking. “Walking through the streets of Cleveland today, I can see why the polls are finally beginning to recognize what we have known for some time.”

The crowds cheered wildly, and those cheers even drowned out the “Stonewall Stonegate” cries.

“Standing here, in this wonderful city in Ohio, how can anyone claim that things are the way they ought to be? How can anyone think that this city, this state, indeed this country doesn’t have work to do? How can anyone think that we need another four years of the past?”

The crowd was deafening. “I stand before you today saying that I do not accept the belief that things should stay as they are, that we should not move forward. We cannot simply lay back and accept some idea that we cannot do better. We should not lie down and suffer the attacks from foreign lands without fighting back. We will not lie down and take it. We will NOT accept it. We WILL take it to them on election day!” she called out. The crowd roared its approval, and the crowd saw red, not from my sunset, but from Don’s map.

“She was greeted by crowds like this all over Ohio today, and tomorrow she plans to move east to Pennsylvania – another battleground state,” the man said, being jostled a bit by the crowd around him.

The anchor came on TV again, but my phone ringing stole my attention.

“Yes, this is Dr. West,” I said softly into the phone. “Dr. West, this is John Sturgis with the Stonegate campaign in Pennsylvania. Tomorrow, Governor Stonegate will be in the state...” I interrupted him, and said, “Thanks, but I’m busy.” “Yes, sir, I can appreciate that you are busy, and that this is must be a very difficult time for you,” he said slowly.

My mouth dropped. This was not a robo-call seeking money or urging me to vote.

“Dr. West, Governor Stonegate will be in Philadelphia tomorrow evening, and would like to see you to offer you her condolences on your loss,” he said with his voice half way between a statement and a question.

I was dumbstruck. Still shocked that I was news and even more shocked that the republican presidential nominee would want to meet with me, I didn't know what to say. My second thought as the next second passed was that she would want to use my image for a picture or a sound byte as part of her campaign. “Um,” was all I could think to say.

“Dr. West, I can appreciate that this is a very difficult time for you, but the governor really does want to express her condolences,” Mr. Sturgis said. I looked out the window, and a car drove by, illuminating the tree with the one strong limb which then faded into darkness as the tree passed.

“OK,” I said. I switched into professional mode. “I'll meet her at my office at Philadelphia State School of Medicine downtown tomorrow.”

Mr. Sturgis said, "Thank you sir for giving us some of your time. The Governor's schedule is still in a bit of flux, but at this point, it looks like she'll be able to see you at about 7:30 p.m. there at your office."

"Fine," I said, "but no cameras and no microphones."

Mr. Sturgis paused. "You understand, Dr. West that these days, cameras follow her everywhere."

"And, you'll have to understand that I had more than my fill of cameras over the last week," I quickly said.

"Yes sir, I understand," Sturgis said. "Governor Stonegate does want to convey her condolences to you, and will meet you in your office. But, you understand that likely there will be reporters outside the doors of Philadelphia State."

"That will be Philadelphia State's problem," I said.

"Yes, Dr. West, I suppose you're right. Can we have your cell phone number to contact you as the hour grows closer tomorrow? I hate to waste your time."

This guy was good, I thought. I gave him my cell phone number, and then said, "It's a date."

"Thank you, sir. We'll see you tomorrow. Have a good evening, Sir," said Sturgis before he hung up.

I walked out the front door, and looked at the tree in the front of the yard. Another leaf dropped to my feet, and I picked it up, and placed it by the curb with the others. I needed to walk around. Walking to the back yard, I walked by the garden where I had sprinkled bits of Terese yesterday. She seemed all around me.

I just looked down, and said out loud, “Well Terese, what have I gotten myself into now?”

Chapter 16

As I arrived at Philadelphia State the next day at about 11 a.m., I felt proud to actually make it back to work. While I wasn't sure meeting with Stonegate was a good idea, it did get me up and get me moving, albeit hours late. I pulled into my space, and saw the BMW to one side, and the Cadillac to the other side just like before, but my life was far from what it was the last time I pulled into my old parking space.

As I entered the hospital, the security guard walked up to me, and said, "Hi Doc," and then more softly, "How are you doing?"

I replied with a halfhearted, "OK, I think. Thanks for asking."

He gave me a smile, and said, "I hear you have a big meeting tonight. We all are getting overtime." The other security guard with him smiled at me, and gave me the thumbs up sign.

"Well, I hope it won't be too big of a show," I said, surprised that the news had reached everybody. But, I guess that the security people would have been among the first notified.

The security guard just smiled back, and said, “Overtime’s overtime, Doc.” I gave him a smile, and took the elevator to my office.

There, piles of papers accumulated over the last week, and I began to wade through them. I was glad that the security guards were happy with their windfall, but I was still not sure I had made the right decision. “Too late for that,” I thought to myself.

The phone rang, and it was Barbara, calling from the inpatient unit. “Word is that you are getting an audience with Stonegate tonight,” she said.

“News does travel quickly,” I said.

“It was on the news,” she said, “I heard it on the 12 noon news here on the unit. It may well be a circus by the time tonight rolls around.”

“Well, I’ve been living in a circus over the last week,” I mentioned, resigned myself to the inevitable chaos of the evening. “But, that appointment did get me out of bed this morning, and did get me here even if it was three or four hours late.”

“Good to have you back,” Barbara said. “But you should look out for yourself in the middle of the media,” she advised.

“I know that already. I should come down to meet with you, though, to go over the plans for closing the unit. I’m sure that people are beginning to flee, or are making plans to run to the closest job.”

“You got that right,” Barbara said. “Why don’t we meet at two, and then we can both talk with the day shift and then the evening shift as they come in.”

“Great idea,” I said, and thought to myself that keeping busy with the other tragedy in my life may take my mind off the main one.

The papers and the emails were endless, and when two o’clock came, I welcomed the chance to walk to the unit. Barbara said she thought that most of the nurses working the day shift, who were more senior with more experience likely nailed down some kind of job, and were waiting to give their notice. If that happened, we wouldn’t have enough staff to keep the unit open even for the period the administration extended to us. “OK, let’s talk to them, get a sense of who is leaving immediately, and then we may have to make plans to cut the census of the unit in half, on the way to closing it entirely,” I advised.

Barbara agreed, and we went out to meet with the day and night shift at their change of shift.

The change of shift is an interesting social phenomenon in a hospital where the members of two groups of nursing staff meet to discuss the day's events, and warn the next shift what to anticipate during their shift. While that discussion always occurred, an exchange of gossip usually took a more prominent place in the meeting. My presence led to a palpable silence among the group, which never happened.

"Dr. West, we're so sorry about what happened to you," one of the nurses finally said.

"Thank you, I appreciate that, and I'm so sorry about losing these units."

"Are the weasels really going to close them down," another nurse asked.

"Yes, that is indeed true. The hospital is losing money, and they figure that they can't make it up on our patients, which is obvious I suppose," I commented, looking out, viewing the people assembled on the couches in the day room.

"But, the hospital needs psychiatry," another said.

"I couldn't agree more, but the feeling is that they can't afford it. They really are going to close down the units. How many of you have already found other jobs," I asked.

About half of the registered nurses raised their hands, and about a quarter of the other staff comprised mostly of young psychology majors recently graduated from college raised their hands as well. These youngsters were working for about the same money as the secretarial staff, and the bulk of the group who had not found other work looked on in envy at the small number who already found another job.

“When will you be leaving,” I asked with all the gravity and concern that I could muster. The general time frame led most to leave by the end of the month. “OK, then we should stop admissions at the end of this week, and see where we are,” I finally said. The unit would be largely empty in about two weeks, but we could reopen with half census if we had enough staff.

“When do they want to close it for good?” one of the psychology staff asked, no doubt wondering when unemployment would begin.

“They want it closed for good by Christmas,” I said.

“Merry Christmas,” another staff member drolly said.

“I know. I’m so sorry,” I said.

“Thank you for being so honest with me, and I promise you I’ll tell you all I know along the way. Barbara will also let you know how things are progressing in the shut down. Continue to do all you can for the patients. They’re in the middle of this with us as well,” I added.

I left the unit with the day shift and I walked out leaving the evening shift to their chores. Nobody blamed me, and thankfully, nobody upbraided me about firing them. I suppose pity does have its value.

Returning to my office, I waded through more emails, and my cell phone went off. “Hello Dr. West, this is John Sturgis with the Stonegate for President Campaign,” he very politely said.

“Yes, Mr. Sturgis,” I replied in my professional tone.

“Governor Stonegate is still looking forward to meeting with you this evening, and we are now leaving Harrisburg, and should be at your office at around the time we discussed, but we may be a few minutes late. I’ll call you as the time approaches to give you a better idea,” he said.

“I understand that you have announced the meeting to the news people,” I added suspiciously.

“Yes sir, all of the day’s events in the campaign is released to the news media,” Sturgis matter of factly replied.

“I didn’t know I was part of the campaign,” I snidely said.

“Yes sir, you are not, but we are approaching the end of our campaign. Tomorrow, when everyone goes to vote, we all will be part of the campaign, and that’s the way it should be,” he said.

I gave up. This guy was too good, and I was too rusty playing politics. “I will be here in my office trying to catch up on work. I do have to thank you for getting me out of bed this morning to get here,” I said a bit mellower than before.

“No sir, we thank you for sharing some time with us during this difficult period for you,” he said.

I could hear the commotion in the background of voices making calls, people yelling instructions, which seemed like barely controlled chaos in the background. But, Sturgis was all business, and as polite as any mother would want him to be. “I’m looking forward to the meeting too,” I finally said.

As I put the cell phone back in my pocket, I looked out my window facing the front of Philadelphia State School of Medicine, and at least four or five news trucks were camped at the front, some with lights and reporters getting ready for their forty seconds on the six o’clock news.

The security guards were in their glory, directing traffic away from the news trucks, and standing in the cool autumn evening with their arms held behind their backs. They were joined on each side by Philadelphia City police cars, and a couple of people with dark suits who were looking four directions at once.

Looking above them, though, was another sunset. My office was high enough in the building that I could see the sun set over the tired structures of the neighborhood, and over the street lights and the noise. The fall in Pennsylvania can be spectacular with leaves changing color drenched in moderate temperatures punctuated by these sunsets. This section of Philadelphia had few trees, and little in the way of natural beauty. But hovering above the tired neighborhood and the broken buildings was another spectacular sunset. The amber colors were growing darker and were turning into a red hue meeting the deep blue sky above. The deep blue again reminded me of Terese's eyes. They were no longer shining, and this sunset, as spectacular as it was would soon be gone too.

I turned on the TV, and the news reports filled the screen with pictures of the campaign. Mooring continued to build his support in the south, hoping that would be enough to carry him to victory.

On his campaign stops, Mooring continued to stand in front of polite crowds cheering and waving the flags given to them. He smiled and waved back at them. His wife stood by, adoringly; matching the respect the crowds were giving to this icon of the Democratic Party.

The picture then switched to the attractive woman reporter who looked like she still needed her nap. She seriously intoned, “Vice President Mooring has been swinging through the south, trying to shore up his support there. The polls have been narrowing, but he feels confident that his get out the vote effort in the south and in the big cities in the north will pay off. Here is what he had to say earlier today. The TV showed Mooring again dressed in his blue suit, with a flag prominently displayed in his label.

“We have traveled a long way together,” Vice President Mooring said almost solemnly into the microphone. The crowd grew quiet.

“Tomorrow, all of our hard work pays off,” Mooring added, as he looked over the crowd, who stared adoringly at him, and he began his practiced cadence of speech. His job now was to rally the base, to encourage voter turnout, and let everyone know that he was still the front runner – until tomorrow, when he hoped to be victorious.

“We must focus on one more day in this campaign, to encourage our voters to go to the polls. America must decide what it wants for its leadership for the next four years. They must decide which candidate is more experienced, which candidate is more prepared to begin to work from day one.” The crowd began to cheer. “We know that as long as we are the strongest nation on earth that people will be coming after us. We need a leader with experience – a leader who knows what the pressures of the White House are like,” he said smiling into the camera.

“Mooring,” someone in the crowd yelled. “Tomorrow, all the voters will be able to decide that too,” he shouted back.

The news then switched to the Stonegate campaign, and showed pictures of Governor Stonegate at the Pittsburgh waterfront this morning shaking hands with supporters with the three rivers in the background. Her speech this morning was brief, held at the park where the three rivers join.

Her husband, Jim Doyle, who largely was campaigning separately over the last several months of the race, joined her for this last day. They were a striking pair, and the photojournalists jostled each other to get their shot to be featured on the front page, tomorrow.

The late night comics called Jim “The Marlboro Man” because of his resemblance to the cowboy model who tried to sell Marlboro cigarettes, and an image. Jim was a rancher whose family owned a spread outside of Havre, Montana, and the two met when Amanda was just establishing her law practice next to the Dairy Queen in Downtown Havre. He was tall, ruggedly handsome, and in fact had done fairly well on the rodeo circuit in his youth. After dating for six months, he had invited her on an overnight trip to the rodeo in Cody, Wyoming. After they arrived, he simply said, “Excuse me for a minute,” and then fifteen minutes later, the announcer said, “Now riding the bull is Jim Doyle from Havre, Montana.” He stayed on the bull for ten seconds, and since then managed to stay in the marriage for over fifteen years. The rumors were that he had a wondering eye with the ladies, but the two made a striking couple on stage.

They both walked on the stage together holding hands, and then waved energetically at the crowd with both hands. Amanda Stonegate quickly stood in front of her husband, and gestured wildly to the crowds. Jim assumed his place behind her, still grinning that infectious smile he used to trap Amanda all those years ago.

Amanda Stonegate started to speak and she said, “Behind me meet two of the great rivers of Pennsylvania – the Allegheny and the Monongahela rivers as they join forces to create the vast Ohio river which goes on to supply the heartland of this great country with water and sustenance. And, today, I am asking those of you in both of the two great parties of this country, democrats and republicans alike to come together to form the power to fuel this nation to its next chapter. Every one of you needs to think about whether the past years have been good enough, whether they have been safe enough for you and for your families,” she said.

“We need Stonegate,” the crowd then began to cheer.

She called back to them, “We need your vote – tomorrow. Vote Stonegate for a strong America!”

The camera then switched to the state capitol building in Harrisburg, where Stonegate held her next rally of today. She stood in front of the concrete steps in front of the vast dome capping the immense capitol building. Again, she was speaking to an excited crowd, “We must not lie down and accept the past. We must defend this great country. No one else can, or should do it. We ALL must do it. WE all must vote tomorrow. Vote Stonegate for a strong America,” she called out again.

The television news then showed the young man with the great hair was standing in front of the Pennsylvania Capitol building and said that the Stonegate campaign was coming to Philadelphia tonight for a ten o'clock event at the Philadelphia Art Museum. She was scheduled to speak by the "Rocky" statue from the movies where an underdog Philadelphia prize fighter battled against overwhelming odds.

"Leave no metaphor unturned," I said to the TV.

"But, before the event, she will be meeting with Dr. Andrew West, the Philadelphia psychiatrist who captured the public's attention last week offering forgiveness to the terrorists who killed his wife in the Manhattan train explosion," he added. "It will be a private meeting, I am told."

I know I should have expected that, but again I was totally taken back. "I'm in the middle of the soup, now," I thought. But, I didn't feel angry, or happy. I was still mostly numb. Part of the reason I agreed to the meeting was to get myself moving in some way.

Looking out the window, the red colors of the sunset were almost gone. The bright overhead lights of the Philadelphia State University parking lot were taking over the horizon.

The TV trucks were arranged throughout the parking lot, all now with their antennae fully extended, reaching to the colors of the horizon. A crowd of reporters were herded by the security guards and police into an area marked with yellow tape. The scene looked like a sheep dog running around rounding up stray livestock. I'm sure the sheep dogs had an easier time.

My cell phone went off again. "Dr. West, this is John Sturgis. I'm afraid that the Governor is running a little late and won't be to see you until about 8:15 or 8:30," he said. "Thanks for letting me know," I simply said, and stared out the window.

It was better to have chaos in my life than nothing, I thought. The scene below was indeed getting more chaotic, as the TV trucks seemed to circle their wagons with the reporters. However, a crowd was gathering, and now several hundred people were milling about in the Philadelphia State parking lot. Some were chanting "Stonewall Stonegate", but most were just curious, amused at the scene unfolding before them. It was not the best neighborhood in which to gather as night approached, but the crowd continued to grow. The parking lot was full of people, and the security guards were the only people there who assumed a carnival was not about to arrive.

Then, a cheer went up from the crowd, and a bus approached decorated with a large picture of Governor Stonegate, with a sign reading “Stonegate for President” across the side. The bus pulled up to the entrance, and Stonegate stepped down from the bus with her husband Jim. Immediately, the scene was washed with the glare of TV lights, and reporters crushed the scene to shout questions. Stonegate and her husband went around the bus, and waved to the crowds, who loudly cheered. They waved again, and went inside my building.

My phone rang, and the security guard at the desk notified me that the Republican Presidential nominee and her husband were on their way up to my office. I didn’t know what to think. It was all such a circus.

There was a knock on my door, and a secret service agent entered, with another agent keeping watch in the hallway.

He politely said, “Mind if I look around, Sir,” and quickly walked through my office and looked out the windows, and then waved to the agent in the hallway, who talked to his sleeve.

A minute later, the other elevator door opened, and out came a odd parade.

My friend, the hospital security guard, let the way, followed closely by a Philadelphia policeman, two other men in suits, and then a somewhat haggard looking man with rolled up sleeves followed by Governor Stonegate and her husband Jim. The hall had been cleared of anyone else, and they all entered my office. It was a bit crowded, but I smiled and invited them into the office marked, “Chair of Psychiatry”.

The small crowd separated, and Stonegate emerged from behind the group. Having seen her on TV many times, I was still surprised at her appearance. While her face looked very tired, she was more striking in person than on TV. Her hair was auburn sprinkled with flecks of grey, which seemed to soften her appearance. She had the high cheek bones of a model supporting deep brown eyes, which were quite alive and seemed to have a sparkle all their own. She seemed shorter in person than I expected, but that killer body was certainly there. She was in her forties, but could have passed for a much younger woman.

Her husband Jim, gave me a big “Howdy,” and said “Thanks for meetin’ with us,” with a decidedly western drawl. He was tall, at least 6’3” with broad shoulders, and a big smile.

A well trimmed moustache decorated Jim's upper lip, and there was a hint of gray hair at the temples. He looked every bit the rodeo rider he was years before. Jim didn't say much, but he didn't need to.

Sturgis came forward and introduced himself. He was the haggard looking man with his sleeves rolled up, and said, "Dr. West, thanks again for your time and for agreeing to meet with us." The other men in suits were eyeing me suspiciously, and continued to look around the office.

Governor Stonegate stepped forward and said, "Dr. West I appreciate you talking with me. I know this is a difficult time for you."

I was still staring at her. But, I managed to say, "This is quite an entourage."

She quickly looked around, and said, "I'm sorry about that. It's a bit of an occupational hazard these days," she said and smiled. Then she turned around and said, "Guys, can you give us a few minutes?" and then looked toward the door.

Sturgis quickly said, "Of course, we'll be by the elevators," and started to leave.

Jim Doyle, Governor Stonegate's husband turned to shake my hand, and loudly said, "Nice meetin' you, Doc", and walked to the door, followed by the security guard and then the policeman. The secret service agents stayed. Stonegate looked at them, and said, "I'll be OK. Just give me five minutes."

They looked at her, then at each other, and said, "Yes Ma'am. We'll be right outside," and then they all exited.

Governor Stonegate then looked at me, and I offered her the polyester upholstered chair in my office, and I took the other one with both chairs facing my metal desk. She leaned toward me, and said, "Doctor West, I wanted to meet you to offer my condolences on your loss. I know it must be terrible for you."

I felt my throat swell, and managed to say, "Well, yes. Thank you for sending the flowers to the funeral."

"My, it's the least I could do after what you've been through," she said. She looked at me with those open brown eyes, which caught mine and locked them in. She was not at all combative or even rough. She was, in a word, charming.

“Doctor West, I really feel that no one should have to go through the loss of a family member like you did. We really do need to do a better job protecting America, and I’m very sorry for your loss,” she said continuing to look my eyes with her big brown eyes.

I didn’t know if that was a sound byte, or concern, but I know that I felt sympathy from her, and a little curiosity. I just said, “Thank you. It has been a rough week.”

“I can only imagine,” she said. She looked down at the floor between us, and then looked me in with her eyes.

“But, I have to ask you something,” Stonegate continued. “Do you really forgive those murderers who killed your wife?” She said with her head cocked to one side. She seemed to evaluate me, and was watching my face and my response.

“Well, to be honest, I don’t think I’m there yet. I do know that I have to find some way to forgive to get beyond this. Otherwise, I’m afraid that I’ll be trapped in anger and hatred, and I’m afraid that I won’t get out of that ditch. So, yes, I’m working to forgive them, working to move on.”

She still examined me with curiosity, and then looked down for a moment. When she lifted her gaze, she said, “Well, maybe I need to learn how to do that too.”

She tried to give me a half smile, but it quickly disappeared from her face. She again looked down, and then reached over to take my hand. “Again, I’m very sorry for your loss, but I think you must be a wise and good man,” she said.

This time, I smiled, and said, “Those two adjectives are not usually associated with my name, but thank you.”

She smiled through those brown eyes, cleared her throat, and said, “And one more thing that I’m asking everybody today. Can I have your vote tomorrow? I’ll need it.”

I should have known that was coming. But, she continued to look at me, holding my hand. “You know, I don’t think I have ever voted for a republican for president before. But, you’re the first one who went out of their way to ask me for my vote. So, what the hell. Yes, Ma’am, you’ll get my vote tomorrow.”

She shook my hand, reflexively this time, it seemed, and said. “Thank you. I appreciate that. But, I’m afraid I’ve got to run. I’ll be busy over the next day or so,” she said with a smile.

The glow in those brown eyes seemed to dim, and she began to walk to the door.

“Thank you again Doctor West, and you know, I hope to learn from your example.” She quickly opened the door, and said to the secret service agent and the men down the hall. “Ok, men, let’s roll.” She quickly walked to the elevator with her entourage, and the doors closed behind her.

Chapter 17

I was alone again in my office, and I remember thinking, “I don’t know what I expected, but that wasn’t it.” She was more attractive in person than the TV cameras showed, and the charisma was certainly evident. But, I was surprised that she was a bit softer than I expected, maybe even vulnerable. Of course, it could be that she was just trying to convey some empathy to me, and I suppose that good politicians do that well.

I looked out the window, and again a cheer went up from the crowd. There was a microphone set up with some loud speakers, and I opened my window. “Thank you all for coming, she said. I appreciate your support. But, I just wanted to stop by here, and offer my condolences to a man who lost what no American should lose – a family member to terrorism. We must face them, and we must defeat them. But, we can only do that if I get your vote. Tomorrow, we can all make a difference,” she called out. “No American should ever again be a victim to terrorism,” and the crowd cheered, and then she and Jim raised their hands together for an instant, but she quickly let go and waved to the crowd.

“So, come on over to the Art Museum, and join me for the rally,” she said, and got on the bus which pulled away as soon as the crowd could be moved.

The crowd did begin to dissipate, and I closed my window. “Enough for one day,” I thought to myself, and walked down the empty hall to the elevator.

When I left the building, the television vans were still there, and the local news people saw me, and then crowded around me. They gathered their cameras, and suddenly bright lights were in my face. “What happened in your meeting, Dr. West,” one called out.

“I met with Governor Stonegate, and she offered me condolences on the death of my wife,” I said. I paused, and then added, “It was very nice of her.”

“So, who are you going to vote for?” another called out.

“I promised Governor Stonegate that she would get my vote,” I said with a smile.

Another shouted, “Doc, do you still forgive those terrorists?”

I stopped walking, and looked at him, and his camera. “Yes, I do. I don’t think hatred ever got any of us anywhere,” I said, and resumed walking.

A variety of other questions surrounded me from the assembled reporters but I had enough of this, and resolved to simply walk to my car.

The security guard I knew came up beside me, and said, “You doing OK, Doc?” and I just nodded, and said, “But I could use some help getting out of the parking lot.” The guard then nodded and waved, and two more security guards wearing the Philadelphia State uniforms arrived and helped to hold the reporters back while I opened the door to my Chevy and pulled away.

I entered the door of my empty house just before ten o'clock. I again turned on the TV to fill the void, and the news channel showed pictures of the Philadelphia Art Museum. The anchor said, “After that last update from the Mooring campaign, we're going to take you live to the Stonegate rally in Philadelphia. Pennsylvania may well be the ultimate swing state in this election and the Stonegate campaign planned a late rally this evening by the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum. Stonegate spent the morning in Pittsburgh, and then made her way to a rally on the state capitol's steps in Harrisburg before coming to Philadelphia this evening. She just left a private meeting with the husband of one of the victims of the train terrorist attack in New York. “

The anchor continued, “We got to know Dr. West from his statement just after the attacks.” They then played again my angry tirade caught in the parking lot of Philadelphia state after Terese’s murder with the closing line, “I forgive you.” Governor Stonegate stopped to offer her condolences to Dr. West this evening before the rally. Dr. West gave these comments after the meeting.”

“My God, when will this end,” I said out loud to the TV.

Then, the TV station showed the clip where I said “I promised Governor Stonegate that she would get my vote,” followed by the “Do you still forgive” question. The camera focused in on me, and came to a close up followed by me saying, “Yes, I do. I don’t think that hatred ever got any of us anywhere.”

“That must have been an emotional meeting,” the reporter next to the anchor commented with a concerned look on his face as the anchor looked to the side and touched his ear with his index finger. “We now go to Philadelphia where the Stonegate rally is about to start,” the anchor said.

The cameras were trained on the steps of the Philadelphia Art Museum. The setting was magnificent.

With a long cascade of concrete steps leading to roman columns in front of the impressive building Governor Stonegate was about to end her unlikely campaign. The crowd continued to build, and began to get more boisterous as time progressed.

Some teenagers climbed the statues in the park to get a better view, and a jovial, party atmosphere seemed to prevail. The cameras panned over to the stage, and the podium was set up directly next to the “Rocky” statue which was located at the bottom of the famous steps of the art museum. In fact, it was these steps that Rocky ran up and then waved his arms in the famous scene from the movie filmed at the site in the mid 1970’s.

After one of the “Rocky” movies finished filming, the production company donated the statue of Rocky waving his hands to the city, not knowing what else to do with it, I suppose. At first, the statue was at the top of the art museum steps, and tourists would frequently climb the steps to have their picture taken with arms outstretched in front of the statue imitating the famous scene the protagonist of the “Rocky” movies made in the original.

But, the elite of the Philadelphia art community, if there was such a thing, objected, with the obvious claim that the statue was not art.

That argument was hard to counter, and the statue moved to South Philadelphia. But, so many tourists complained, along with the tour bus companies, for so long that a compromise of sorts was reached, and the statue was placed off to the side of the art museum, at the bottom of the steps. That is where the Stonegate campaign placed their podium.

“I bet you put it there, Sturgis,” I said to the TV with a smile.

Then, the lights began to build, and music came on. The theme from Rocky began with the horns in the music gradually building in volume. The crowd began to cheer, and the volume of the music grew even louder. When the music hit the bottom two notes of the horn section at the beginning of the Rocky theme, the crowd screamed even louder. Then, Amanda Stonegate took the stage, followed by her husband. The cheers were deafening as the rest of the Rocky theme played, and she waved, and then grabbed her husband’s hand and they both waved to the crowd. The theme from Rocky continued to play, and the fighter from Montana who was the clear underdog at the beginning of the race allowed herself to smile and wave to the crowd. The music dimmed, and she took the podium.

“Philadelphia, do you love an underdog?” she cried out. The crowd screamed cheers in reply. They continued to cheer, and she nodded her head up and down in reply. Finally, she stretched her arms out, and moved her hands down as a signal for the crowd to quiet somewhat. “Tomorrow, we must decide what direction America is going to take. Tomorrow, we must decide if we are going to simply wander along the same course we have been following. Tomorrow, we decide if we are just going to lay down and allow ourselves to be attacked, or to choose a new path – to defend America and build a stronger, better future for all of us. Tomorrow...you decide,” she said finally, and the crowd began to cheer loudly again.

“There is no more important decision that you can make,” Stonegate said. “I just left a meeting with Dr. West, who went through the unspeakable tragedy of losing his wife to a terrorist attack. He may be able to forgive the terrorists, but I will never forget. I will never stop working to make America safe, to make you and your family safe,” she told the crowd.

I looked at the TV, and again my mouth dropped open. I know that I should have expected that line, but losing your wife is such an intensely personal tragedy, being in the middle of a presidential campaign still shocked me.

“When I met with Dr. West,” she said, and stopped for a moment, and looked forward into the crowd. The crowd responded and began to quiet. “When I met with Dr. West, I asked him who he was going to vote for tomorrow. He said that I had earned his vote. Have I earned yours?” The crowd again cheered loudly, and started yelling, “Stonewall Stonegate, Stonewall Stonegate, Stonewall Stonegate.”

“Just like this guy next to me,” she said, pointing to the Rocky statue, “we are the underdogs in this campaign. But, just like this guy, we can gut it out in the end! Go out and vote tomorrow. Go out and vote for America and America’s security tomorrow!” she screamed into the microphone.

The theme from “Rocky” again blared from the loud speakers, and this time when the horns were playing, the crowd starting jumping back and forth, and some of the teenagers actually started to mime fist fighting. The cameras caught them jumping around, and then panned back to Stonegate who was holding her husband Jim’s hand up in the air and waving. They then separated and went to opposite ends of the stage, with Governor Stonegate sticking close to the Rocky statue.

The young man with the great hair came back on TV, and said, “Governor Stonegate has been generating this kind of excitement all day.” She is going to catch a few hours sleep, and then go on to Cincinnati for an Election Day rally at 7 a.m. tomorrow.”

The TV anchor returned to the screen, and said, “Isn’t a rally on election day unheard of?” he asked. The man with the great hair came back on, but by now, the crowd around him was jumping around to the theme from Rocky, and he was being moved back and forth with the swaying of the crowd. Still, his hair did not move. “There are a lot of things in this campaign that are unusual,” he said. “Governor Stonegate thinks she is very close, and wants to push to the very end,” he said.

The anchor came back on the screen, and said with a smile, “we should be in for an interesting day tomorrow.”

I turned off the TV, and then turned the lights off in my living room, and started walking to bed. “I wonder if they know that Rocky lost the fight at the end of the original movie,” I asked myself.

Chapter 18

I set my alarm for seven o'clock, and resolved to make it to the hospital on time tomorrow. But, I tossed and turned for almost an hour. Finally, I grabbed Terese's pillow next to me, and held it tight, and allowed the tears to come. I loosened the grip on the pillow slightly, and the next thing I knew the alarm was going off. I quickly grabbed it, hoping not to wake Terese, I was thinking to myself. But, then the fog cleared from the night's sleep, and I saw the blankets and the sheets in disarray on the floor. "I'm a mess," I thought, "but I'm going to work today" – not out of any sense of dedication, but simply in the hope of getting myself moving again.

The traffic sign on the Schuylkill Expressway promised me an easy trip, but I knew better. But, still I pulled between the BMW and the Cadillac at only ten minutes after eight. "Not bad," I thought, and mentally gave myself a pat on the back.

Entering the door to the hospital, the security guard asked, "Well Doc, did you vote yet?" "Not yet, I'll do that after work. But I did want to thank you for your help last night," I responded.

The security guard looked down rather sheepishly, then looked at me and said, "That's my job, Doc. You be sure to call me if you need anything." I smiled back, and shook his hand. "I'm voting for her too," he said, and then added, "Anyone with a body like that gets my vote."

We both laughed, and I shook my head. "Thanks again," I said heading over to the elevator.

My desk with its slightly rusty metal trim was still there, as were the chairs for our famous meeting last night. I was expecting a reporter to jump out of my file drawer. But, the pile of mail and email grabbed my attention, and I started drifting through the email. An email from the CEO of Philadelphia State School of Medicine caught my eye, and I opened it. "Thank you for displaying such a positive view of Philadelphia State to the country. We appreciate that you continue to display our mission with such force," and the note was signed with the CEO's first name.

I was again shocked. It then occurred to me that I could have said a variety of negative things about the institution in my interviews after they closed my inpatient beds in the hospital, and decimated my department in the process.

But, unfortunately, that never occurred to me.

I just lost my wife, and those other things were secondary-- but not to the CEO. "What a weasel," I said out loud, echoing the sentiment from one of Barbara's staff from yesterday.

Upset, I drifted down the inpatient units, officially to "check in with the staff," but unofficially to get away from my email.

I unlocked the door to the unit, and walked into the day room again with the glare of the television greeting me. The omnipresent anchor was there, once again regaling us with the day's events. "Turnout has been heavy so far across the country. The polls in the east have been open for several hours, and higher than expected turnout is being consistently reported," he said. "Among the first voters this morning was Vice President Mooring, who ventured out to his polling place north of Richmond," and the TV screen showed Mooring smiling, with his wife holding his arm walking into the polling place, shaking hands with the small crowd who gathered there to vote. He pushed aside the curtain to the voting booth, cast his vote, and left the building waving his right arm to the small crowd gathered there. His wife held his hand, looking up at him with worshipful approval.

“Senator Smithson, the republican vice presidential candidate was also up early, voting at his home in Hartford, Connecticut. He then will be flying to Havre, Montana to join Governor Stonegate to await the election results in that tiny Montana town tonight,” the anchor said with picture of Smithson waving to the small crowd outside his polling booth showing behind him. “Governor Stonegate, on the other hand, just finished campaigning following her morning rally in Cincinnati, where she again addressed a crowd on the riverfront. Ohio is thought to be a swing state at the moment, and we’ll be watching it closely tonight as the returns come in,” the anchor said. They showed Stonegate smiling at the crowds, and waving, as she jumped on her bus. “She’ll be flying to Havre, Montana, the small hamlet that claims her as their own, where she’ll be voting when she arrives later this afternoon. Then she’ll await the election returns with Senator Smithson at a rally in the school gym at Havre High School. Her campaign says that’s the biggest room in town,” the anchor said smiling.

The female anchor next to him said, “I’m sure that gym has seen some contests over the years, but none bigger than the one today.”

Barbara joined me next to the TV. “You’ve become quite a celebrity, you know,” she said.

“I’d gladly trade my fifteen minutes of fame,” I said. “How are things here,” I asked.

“Two more nurses have given us their two week notice,” she said. “The rats are leaving the sinking ship.”

“We’re going to have to keep an eye on both the census of the units and the staff,” I said. “We’ll aim to keep the unit open for as long as we can to give some of the psychology technicians a chance to find something. So, homeless people who need a home can have one for a few weeks,” I said.

Barbara smiled, and said, “Aye Aye, Sir.” She then looked at me, and said, “Are you OK?” and looked at me with a studied expression on her face.

“Everybody asks me that,” I said.

“Don’t dodge the question,” she countered.

“I’ve been better, but I was worse last week,” I said honestly.

Barbara smiled back, and said, “Well, don’t forget we’ve got an open bed here for you.”

“We’ll see how today goes,” I said with only a half smile. I resolved to call The Oracle to make an appointment when I returned to my office.

I did make it through that day, and managed to find the bottom of my email. At five o'clock on the button, I left, and started to make my way home. I tried to pull into the church parking lot, which housed the polling booths for our neighborhood, but the lot was packed. I parked in the supermarket across the street.

Voting was always fun. The voting booths were manned by the elders of the neighborhood, and because I had actually run for office in the past, I was always greeted warmly by the members of the League of Women Voters and the few men who came out to do their civic duty to monitor the voting, and the sign in sheets at the polling place. In Lancaster County, where I lived when I ran for congress, the foyer to the hall where the voting booths were stationed always was staffed by women running a bake sale for the church. I always bought a whoopee pie there before voting. A whooppe pie is best translated as a big cream filled chocolate cake donut on steroids. I had to lick my fingers before voting, which in Lancaster County, was not considered gauche.

Philadelphia had yet to discover those charms, but talking with neighbors in line was always a comforting social event.

But, this time, I didn't know how the events of my life over the last week would play with my friends and neighbors gathered to vote. Waiting in line to vote, we typically traded stories about our neighbors and children. It was considered gauche to talk about politics with a secret ballot. But, my life had been anything but secret over the last weeks.

I entered the building and barely was inside when I met the line to the polling booths. I quietly waited, but began to feel the stares of the other people in line. I wasn't sure if I was being paranoid until I saw some fingers pointing. Luckily, one of my neighbors joined the line behind me, and we began to talk. Again the series of questions started, "How are you holding up...let us know if we can do anything...are you back to work yet...it must be tough for you...I can't imagine what it must be like,"etc., etc. , etc. After a few uncomfortable minutes, he said, "I saw you on TV last night, and I guess I know who you're voting for," he smiled and said.

"Yup, it has been quite a time," I said. I passed small talk for forty five minutes, and then it was my turn to vote.

I entered the voting booth, and with the same hand that had held hers last night, pressed down on the button reading “Republican: Stonegate, Amanda” and then opened the curtains where I was met by the smiling face of an elder woman.

“Thank you so much for being the example you are, and my heartfelt condolences to you,” she said.

I stammered, “Thank you” and put my head down and left the building as quickly as I could, and found my way across the street to my car. It would be a while, I thought, until my celebrity faded.

Though, I underestimated that too.

Chapter 19

Election night was a beautiful fall night in Philadelphia. Some leaves were lingering on the trees, and the temperature was a crisp 58 degrees. I pulled into my driveway, grateful that I needed no security guards to escort me from my car. I looked up, and that tree at the edge of our property was still stubbornly hanging over the driveway. Half of the tree dangled branches over the driveway, and the other half, which had been claimed by the storm held sentry over the street. That half was still empty, waiting to be filled in the spring. I walked around to the back yard, and felt drawn to the garden once again, and watched the end of the sunset. The reds were fading into night, and the moon was clearly visible over the horizon.

I looked down, and said, "Terese, I'm so sorry that I wasn't there with you."

I didn't want to die. I just wanted to be with her, or at least to have my life back. Over the last few days, I had waves of grief where I would quickly hide my head, or dash to the bathroom to hide, and other times when I felt more normal and work seemed to offer a respite. The election, surprisingly enough, was another one of those distractions. I looked down at the garden, but it was now dark. I entered the house to be distracted by the news and the election.

Of course, a presidential election is the super bowl of news coverage, and you could feel the excitement building from the anchors. This was their big story of the year, and they were excited to be part of it. They showed their various reporters, and Don was back again, prancing in front of his magic map, waving at this color, and that state.

The anchor then returned to the TV, and said, “Now we go to our coverage team in Havre, Montana with the Stonegate campaign.” The young man with the great hair was flanked on either side by two women, and they were standing in a school classroom. “Tonight, Governor Stonegate is having her election rally in the high school gym in this small Montana town. It’s the biggest building in town, and each news outlet has been assigned a classroom from which to work. We’re in Mr. Murphy’s 9th grade English classroom, with notes from Dickens’ “The Tale of Two Cities” on the board. Indeed, tonight, we will be covering the Tale from the two cities of Havre, Montana and Richmond, Virginia. It will be the best of times, or the worst of times for those two cities, and by the morning, we’ll know which city will have which tale to tell. Now, back to you,” he said.

The anchor then smiled, and said, "And now to the other city, Richmond, for their side of the tale." The attractive woman who had been following Vice President Mooring came on the screen, and said, "We'll be following tonight's results here at the Richmond Hilton. Vice President Mooring is secluded upstairs with his staff, and he'll be watching the results along with us as the night progresses. We, of course, have no results yet, but we can tell you that turnout was very heavy throughout the country. This election featuring the first woman major party candidate against the Vice President narrowed considerably in the last week, and frankly, it is anybody's race at the moment. It could be a long night," she said.

"It's been a long week," I said to the TV.

I left to eat dinner, and I kept the TV on in the background. When I returned, at about 8:30, Don was standing in front of his map. "As you can see, Massachusetts, New York, as well as the southern states of Alabama, Georgia and Florida all went to Vice President Mooring. South Carolina goes to Stonegate, as expected, and we'll be watching the rest of the east. At this point, with only the beginning returns in, both Ohio and Pennsylvania are too close to call."

The anchor then began to break down the vote, showing that Stonegate, as expected, had done well with women voters, and that Mooring had done well in traditional urban centers which usually went democratic in the past. “The race is tight, much tighter than anyone expected a week and a half ago. The terrorist attack in New York seems to be playing a role in general, across the east. Although, Mooring had a large lead in that democratic state, and we project that he will manage to hold onto New York in the election.” He said.

Eight o’clock rolled around and Mooring grabbed New Jersey, and Stonegate picked up a number of states in the Midwest.

“So far, Ohio is up for grabs,” the anchor said. “In Pennsylvania, another swing state, Mooring has a sizable lead from the early votes being counted in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, but those cities always count their ballots first, and so we cannot project a winner at this time.”

The anchor then switched to film from the “Rocky Rally” as they were calling Stonegate’s campaign appearance at the Rocky Statue in Philadelphia, and they again showed the news clip with Stonegate saying she had won my vote, and she needed the votes of all Pennsylvanians as well.

“Stonegate waged an aggressive campaign over the last few days, ending only this morning with a rally in Ohio,” he said. “I hope she got some sleep on the plane to Montana,” the other anchor added.

I never had my vote announced publicly before, even when I ran for Congress. I could only shake my head – the situation seemed so surreal.

My concentration faded, and I looked around the room at pictures of Terese and me, and all the things in the room representing the life we built together. The memories were both comforting and painful, and I stared off.

The stare must have turned into a nap, because the next time I looked toward the TV, the clock in our living room said, “11:45”. I wiped my eyes, and looked again at the TV. Don was again dancing, with arms moving even more excitedly up and down. The anchor was asking him questions, and I was beginning to focus.

“So, Don we have projected that Mooring will take California and Oregon as expected, and that Stonegate will take Montana, the Dakotas, as well as Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico and Arizona,” the anchor said.

Don looked serious, and pointed and made the map go blue and red a few times, and then said, “Yes, that’s right,” he said staring lovingly at his map.

“We have not had this severe of a regional split in a presidential election in some time. Stonegate captured much of the interior of the country, and Mooring has the east coast and California. At this point, Mooring has a large lead in the electoral college vote, although the popular vote is a virtual tie at this point,” Don added.

Don then showed graphs and charts, summarizing it all once again. “Still, he said, “Mooring is short of an Electoral College victory, and Ohio and Pennsylvania remain too close to call.”

The cameras then returned to the anchor who said, “We are trying to be very careful not to tell you what we think about the outcomes in those states. We will only tell you what we know. We all learned a lesson from the 2000 election when we called Florida both ways. So, even though 85% of the vote is in for both Ohio and Pennsylvania, both states are too close to call at this time. In Ohio, Stonegate holds a 3% lead, but in Pennsylvania, Mooring holds a 4% lead. We will have to wait to see if those leads will hold up as the night goes on,” the anchor said. Don went back to his magic board and had numbers jumping out of it. “Even if Stonegate wins Alaska, which she is expected to do, she will need the electoral votes from both Ohio and Pennsylvania to win the election,” he said.

“Let’s go to our election teams in Richmond and Havre for more,” the anchor said. The attractive young woman then came on the screen, standing next to a man in a white shirt with his sleeves rolled up, and a big “Mooring for President” button above his pocket. The woman said, “I am here with a Joe Gerudi, a prominent operative for the Mooring campaign. Joe, what can you tell us?” she asked.

Joe gave a big smile. “Well, the last few days have been tighter than we hoped, but we feel confident now. “ The reporter said, “Really, Stonegate is ahead in Ohio.”

But Joe countered, “Yes, but we have a comfortable lead in Pennsylvania, and we feel good about that. At this point, we think we only need to win one of those two states to win the presidency.”

The camera focused on the attractive woman, and she said, “So, confidence is coming from the Mooring camp at this hour.”

The anchor broke in, and said, “We now can call Ohio for Governor Stonegate. Again, when all the votes are tallied, we project that Ohio will go for Governor Amanda Stonegate.” They showed a picture of Amanda Stonegate lurking over a map of Ohio with a big check mark next to her smiling face.

In the picture, she was smiling, showing her teeth, and while she looked attractive, I didn't think the picture really captured her.

"Well, Amanda, it looks like you're going to the last round, hoping for a split decision," I said out loud to the TV.

"Now we go to Havre High School for an update from the Stonegate campaign," the anchor said. The camera switched to the high school gym, with music playing, and it was packed with people standing around and talking. The reporter appeared on the screen, with the background filled with people, and the stage at the end of the gym was draped with red, white and blue bunting. "You can feel the tension in the air here," she said. "Everyone, of course, is following the results on the big TV projected on the wall, and on their smart phones. Here is one person waiting out the results with us," she said, and the camera showed a middle aged woman with a big "Uncle Sam" hat on, and several "Stonegate for President" buttons decorating the vest she wore.

"What do you think," the reporter asked the woman.

"Well, I'm from Havre, and we are so proud of our Amanda. No matter what happens tonight, we think she's showed everybody how tough we western women can be," she smiled and said.

The reporter then returned to the screen and said, “We understand that Governor Stonegate left her ranch outside of town, and is watching the results at the home of a friend in Havre. She’ll be coming to the gym once the results are known. She is watching the results in the middle of Havre with Senator Smithson, who joined her this afternoon, and a few close friends. Now to our headquarters at Mr. Murphy’s classroom,” she smiled and said.

The man with the great hair came on TV and said, “This is tight,” he said in front of the blackboard. “I know that Don has the latest in gadgets and computer graphics to offer you, but here in Havre, there is only one word our black board can show you,” and the camera panned past “The Tale of Two Cities” notes and showed the word “Pennsylvania” written in capital letters on the blackboard. The man with the great hair pointed at the blackboard, and said, “Pennsylvania will tell us whether it will be the best of times or the worst of times in Havre, Montana tonight.”

The anchor came back on and they switched back to Don. Don was now standing in front of a map of Pennsylvania. Philadelphia and Pittsburgh were blue, as was Harrisburg representing democratic strongholds, but most of the rest of the state was red.

“At this point,” Don said, 93% of the vote has been counted, and Pennsylvania is still too close to call. Mooring now has a 2% lead, but the republican strongholds of north central Pennsylvania have not yet been counted. More importantly, we are waiting for the returns from the Philadelphia suburbs, which will likely tell the story for the state, and indeed for the entire nation this election night.”

It was now 2:30 a.m., and after my nap, I was definitely not going to bed. Alaska went to Stonegate as expected, and Mooring captured Hawaii. Mr. Murphy’s blackboard in his ninth grade English class was correct. The Presidential election now was going to be decided in suburban Pennsylvania.

The anchor returned to the TV, and said, “We now have returns from north central Pennsylvania, and Stonegate has taken all of those counties, as expected, but Mooring still clings to a 1% lead in the state with 95% of the vote counted. We have talked with officials from the Philadelphia suburbs, and they tell us that the turnout was so heavy that they wanted to make sure everyone who was in line by 8 p.m. voted, and some polling places didn’t close until 10 p.m. The high turnout is taking longer to tally,” he said.

The anchor then turned to a table of “experts” who, of course didn’t know any more than I did. They discussed how the race tightened over the last week, and that somehow Stonegate and her operatives had gambled correctly to focus on Pennsylvania and Ohio in the last days of the campaign. “It was interesting that Stonegate took time out from the last day of campaigning to visit Dr. Andy West, the Philadelphia psychiatrist who lost his wife in the terrorist attack. This seemed to spark the Stonegate surge and we’ll see if it will translate into a republican surge in the Philadelphia suburbs. Stonegate used that meeting to stimulate emotional support, and it may have paid off in the conservative, Christian northern part of the state,” the ‘expert’ said. The next ‘expert’ quipped, “I wonder if the psychiatrist can see into the hearts of suburban Philadelphia to help us call this race.”

“What a jerk!” I yelled at the screen. I left the TV, and went to kitchen to get something to eat, and when I calmed down enough, I rejoined the living room, and Don at his map.

“We continue to receive the returns from suburban Philadelphia, and things are tightening even more. In the national popular vote, it is very, very close, but Stonegate holds a slight lead.”

More graphs appeared on the television screen. “Stonegate now is tallying 49.1% of the national vote to 48.9% for Mooring, with the remainder going to a variety of third party candidates,” Don said.

Then the anchor broke in and said excitedly, “Don, we have now received almost all the returns from suburban Philadelphia, and after a very long night we are able to project a winner in Pennsylvania and in the election. We now project that Amanda Stonegate will take Pennsylvania, and become the first woman president of the United States of America.”

The camera immediately switched to the Havre High School Gym, and people were screaming, jumping up and down. The bleachers had been pulled out before the rally started, and people started stamping their feet on the boards of the bleachers, at first randomly and then in unison.

“StonewallStonegate...StonewallStonegate...Stonewal Stonegate” the crowd began yelling in time with the stamping feet. The man with the great hair came on screen, and said loudly into the microphone, “It’s pandemonium here. Governor Amanda Stonegate, the girl from Havre, Montana has been elected the first woman president of the United States.”

“No one gave her a chance at the start of the campaign, and in fact, no one gave her a chance two weeks ago. However, she will be leaving the Havre High School Gym tonight to go to the White House. The former beauty queen, the lawyer who took on big oil, and the Governor of this western state will be the first woman to lead America...” He continued to try to talk, but the crowd was now deafening. He tried to say something, but someone ran up behind him and jostled his hair. It moved.

“I’ll be damned,” I smiled at the TV.

Chapter 20

The ‘experts’ chimed in on how improbable the entire story was, that a woman governor from a sparsely populated western state is now the president-elect of the United States. That discussion was followed by speculation that the election could be held up for days as the votes from Pennsylvania were counted again. It was close – very close, but it appeared that Stonegate captured Pennsylvania, and the national election. Scenes from the celebration in the Havre High School gym were flashing across the stage, and the scene was jubilant, but chaotic.

Finally, the anchor came on and said that Vice President Mooring was going to make a statement. The cameras switched to the Hilton Hotel in Richmond, and Mooring took the stage. He was still wearing his suit, and his wife was still at his side, but she looked totally shocked. He gave the crowd a smile, and showed his teeth like the professional he was.

“Tonight,” he said as the crowd quieted, “America is counting its votes for the next President of the United States. And, while no doubt there will be recounts, I want to congratulate Governor Stonegate on a campaign well fought, and if it turns out that she won the election...”

Then the crowd started shouting, “NO, NO, NO.” Mooring moved his hands up and down to silent the crowd a bit, and continued. “And if it turns out that she won the election, I want to offer my congratulations, and help in the new administration,” he said. Mrs. Mooring simply looked down at the floor of the podium. The crowd resumed its shouts of “No, No” and then the camera switched to the attractive woman who had been following the Mooring campaign from the beginning.

“We received this carefully worded statement from Mooring,” she said. “He wants to appear gracious, but is not yet ready to concede the election to Governor Stonegate. I have spoken with a number of his staff people, and they are all in a state of shock.

Only two weeks ago, they were making plans for the Mooring administration, and it appears they lost the election in a stunning come from behind victory by Stonegate,” she said.

The anchor began to discuss what may happen next in this very unlikely election. The panel of experts generally agreed that the appeals process would begin, but it would be an uphill fight for Mooring to make any dent in Stonegate’s electoral college lead.

“Almost certainly, they will appeal the vote counts in both Ohio and Pennsylvania, but in those states, the votes were counted electronically, and the small number of absentee ballots will now hold great importance. Many of them were cast weeks ago, and the Mooring camp hopes that they may yet give the election to their man, but the chance of that seems slim at the moment.”

The anchor returned to the TV screen, and said, “So it seems lots of drama will be coming our way in the days and weeks to come. But, now, we must go to the Havre High School gym in Havre, Montana, where Governor Amanda Stonegate and Senator Smithson are about to take the stage.”

There couldn't have been a deeper contrast between the two settings. The gym in Havre was jubilant, with people jumping around, and screaming. The young man with the great hair came on the screen, and said, “It's been pandemonium here ever since Pennsylvania went to Stonegate, apparently handing her the election. There has been non-stop screaming and literally dancing in the aisles. I understand that Governor Stonegate and Senator Smithson have now left their friend's home in Havre, and are on their way to the gym to address this raucous crowd.”

“What does her staff say about her apparent victory,” the anchor asked. “They are joyous, and seem to find the whole turn of events hard to believe as well,” the reporter said. “They tell me that they knew the race was tightening over the last week, and deliberately focused on Ohio and Pennsylvania in the closing days to try to maximize their turnout there, but they seem as shocked as anyone about the outcome. It should be quite a moment when Governor Stonegate takes the stage at her home high school gym to greet her supporters - - her first speech since apparently being elected the first woman president of the United States,” the man with the great hair said.

The camera panned the gym, and showed people dancing on the floor of the gym, with people on the bleachers hugging each other. Over to the side of the gym, there was a teenager sitting on the shoulders of another teen, and she was cutting the nets down from the basketball hoop off to the corner of the gym as if the Havre team just won the state championship.

“I understand that President Elect Stonegate reached the gym, and is trying to make it backstage to address the crowd,” the young man with the great hair said. “She is going to have a hard time getting there, and making her way through the pandemonium here, though.’

After he managed to shout above the crowd, he said, “We will have that moment for you, and we are going to stay here until she addresses the crowd,” he commented. The camera continued to show scene after scene of people jumping around, and then focused on the smiling face of a young girl who couldn’t have been more than ten years old. She was wearing a button saying, “I can be president too”.

Then, the lights dimmed in the gym, and some of chaos decreased, as all the crowd did not quite realize yet what was happening. Then, the loudspeakers started playing the theme from “Rocky”, with the horns blaring at full blast. The crowd, deafening before, seemed to grow even louder, and when Governor Stonegate emerged from the red, white and blue bunting to the podium on stage the cameras on the floor of the gym began shaking from the noise and the movement in the gym. She stood there, waving, for a full two minutes and even after the theme from “Rocky” stopped, she couldn’t say anything because the noise from the crowd in the gym was so loud. Finally, she moved her palms up and down, and the crowd quieted enough to listen to this historic moment. But, they soon erupted again with shouts of “Stonegate...Stonegate”, and she again tried to gain control of the pandemonium filling the Havre High School Gym.

“Tonight, with your help, America elected its first woman president. I do not want to dwell on that, however. Tonight is the beginning of our work to once again work to establish the United States of America as the predominant power it once was. Senator Smithson, or should I say Vice President-Elect Smithson,” she said and smiled as the crowd once again roared in approval, “and I began working on the new administration on the ride over here tonight.”

“We have a lot to do, and I can’t wait to get started,” she said with a smile. The crowd again roared, and started yelling “Stonewall Stonegate, Stonewall Stonegate, Stonewall Stonegate”.

“We need to insure that America becomes safe from attacks. We will not lie down and accept any attack on us. We will not accept the status quo. We have already begun working, and we will continue to work until these goals are reached,” Stonegate said, now with a stern face.

The crowd continued to roar and chant, and it was difficult at times to make out what she was saying.

She continued, “And I want to thank each and every one of you for your vote, for your support, and for your trust in me. We will fight back!” And then, the crowd roared again, and she stepped away from the podium.

She looked back and Senator Smithson joined her, and they raised their hands together in the typical election night victory pose. The crowd continued to roar its approval.

The anchor began to narrate the scene since it was too loud for anyone on the floor of the gym to comment. “There we have the victory speech from President Elect Amanda Stonegate. Given from her own high school gym in Havre, Montana, she announced with determination that she has already begun working on her administration. Now, we see that the President Elect and the Vice President Elect are being joined by their spouses on stage.” Jim Doyle, President-Elect Stonegate’s husband dwarfed Mrs. Smithson as both emerged from the red, white and blue bunting to join their spouses on stage. Mrs. Smithson immediately hugged her husband, and gave him a kiss, and Jim grabbed Amanda Stonegate’s hand and raised it in the air again like the referee announcing the victor of a prize fight. The crowd again roared its approval.

I looked at the clock, and it was five a.m. I had time for only two hours sleep before work, and I raised my hand to “high five” the TV before turning it off.

As the alarm went off, I was in the middle of a dream that rocked my sleep several times already. Terese was there, looking at me, smiling with those magnificent blue eyes, but not saying a thing. I tried to speak to her, but all I managed to say was “Terese, Terese...”

I reached over and turned the alarm off.

Chapter 21

As the next week passed, life began to settle a bit more for me. I actually was hungry once or twice. Work was a blessing, and I even welcomed the paperwork, which was something I thought I would never say. The news reports, which faded more into the background of my thoughts continued with non-stop stories of the election, non-stop analysis of the election and non-stop analysis of the television analysis. The sound bytes of me saying “I forgive you,” and telling the camera that Stonegate had my vote were played now and then as well. And, the recounts had started, but Stonegate was holding her slim lead in both Ohio and Pennsylvania.

I had an appointment with The Oracle that I scheduled the day of the election. I didn't know what I would say, or what he would say. I just knew that I had to get some of this weight off my chest.

I left work, and inched onto the Schuylkill Expressway, and traffic clogged all the lanes as far as I could see. The traffic sign hanging over the lanes said, "City Ave – 8 miles, 15 minutes," but I knew that was optimistic. I resolved to stay on the four lane highway, though, and 25 minutes later, I was in The Oracle's outer office. I was a full ten minutes early.

As usual, there was no one else in the waiting room. The ten minutes between patients allowed him not only to return phone calls and do notes, but also allowed the previous patient to escape without being seen. The bad décor of his waiting room was still there, with the Monet print facing the Navajo rug. The African carvings with the misshaped head were on the table in front of me, and they seemed to be staring at me. "What do you want," I said out loud. They continued to stare.

Exactly, on the hour, the oracle appeared at his door, and said, "Andy, I'm so sorry." It was the first time he ever made the first comment to me and then he patted me on the back. An analyst is supposed to wait for the first utterance to come from the patient. And, he runs time like a union foreman, and never, ever touches a patient.

"Thank you," I said, and he closed one door, and then the other behind me. We were now sealed in his office.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” he said again. “I know how close the two of you were.” Everyone seemed to know that my wife had been killed in the terrorist attack several weeks ago, and The Oracle, who knew all, was no exception.

“Thank you, I’m OK,” I said reflexively.

“No you’re not,” the Oracle said. “You won’t be OK for a while.”

I looked down, and nodded in agreement. That was sure true. “I know it takes a while,” I said. He continued to look at me. Usually, his face was blank, but now, it conveyed a combination of sympathy and, I think curiosity. He continued to look at me, with the white hair of his beard moving back and forth as he moved his mouth.

“I don’t really know how I’m doing,” I finally said. “I’m back at work, thank God, and despite the stress from closing the units, it gives me a reason to get up in the morning. I don’t know what I would do without that.”

The Oracle simply nodded.

We looked at each other for a while.

“Sometimes, I think I’m doing OK. I can concentrate on work, and even enjoy a funny story, or the sports pages in the paper. At other times, I’m a mess. I cry out of the blue. Those times, I run to the bathroom at work, or if I’m at home, I get up and walk around the house,” I said.

“That’s pretty normal, don’t you think,” The Oracle countered.

“I suppose so,” I said. I had the definite feeling that we were both dancing around something.

The Oracle continued to stare at me, and more time faded.

Finally, he said, “I have to ask you something. Do you really forgive the terrorists who killed Terese?” he asked, and his eyes focused in on me.

“Naa, I just said that because I wanted to piss them off,” I said.

The Oracle smiled. “Effective ploy,” he said, continuing to smile.

The smile gradually faded from the Oracle’s lips.

“What do you really think,” the Oracle asked.

I looked down for a full minute. I diverted my attention to the windows where a small stream of light was making its way through the heavy red drapes. “What I really think is that I have to find some way of moving on from all of this. I just can’t sit here and stew in all of the - - sadness and tears and hate...Or, it will eat me up,” I said slowly. “I remembered the last time I was here we talked about the importance of finding another way. When Terese was killed, that occurred to me.

And, I remembered when I lived in Lancaster County when some idiot broke into a one room school house and killed a bunch of Amish girls. Their families said they forgave the idiot, and actually went to his house to offer condolences to the surviving widow of the man who killed their own family members.

When they were asked by the press why they did that, they simply said that their religion teaches the power of forgiveness. And if we are to be forgiven our sins, we must forgive others -- is all they said." I looked down again.

"Many religions preach the power of forgiveness," The Oracle said slowly. "Are you worried about your own forgiveness?" he asked.

"Damn it," I said suddenly. "I've done a lot of stupid, petulant things. But, I've never blown up a bunch of women," I said angrily. The Oracle continued to look at me.

Minutes passed. "I should have been there with her," I said, and started to cry. The Oracle pushed the tissue box towards me. I took a tissue this time. "She shouldn't have been there alone," I said. "I should have been there. If I had been there, then..." My voice faded.

"Then what?" The Oracle asked.

“Then, maybe I could have done something,” I said slowly. The tears really were pouring out now, and I couldn’t look at him. I was sobbing, and turning back and forth in the chair. I remember that he gave me a chance to calm down over a few minutes.

“If you’d have been there, you would have been blown up too,” The Oracle said softly.

“Sometimes I think that wouldn’t have been half bad,” I said angrily. “At least I’d be with her.”

“You’ll always have her,” The Oracle said, almost tenderly. “But, are you thinking that you’ll do anything to hurt yourself or kill yourself now?” he asked.

“No, but it is hard sometimes,” I said.

“I bet it’s hard all the time, now,” The Oracle replied. “Will you be OK?” he asked again.

“I’m not going to do anything to harm myself, if that is what you’re asking. Sometimes I’m OK and sometimes I’m not so good,” I replied, looking him full in the face.

I looked back out the window. That small stream of light was still there.

“So, what about forgiveness,” the Oracle finally asked. I looked back at him almost angrily. He was sitting there, in his white shirt with no tie, with that white beard, and the white hair parted down the middle like it was 1930.

“What about forgiveness?” I spouted back at him, raising my voice. “You don’t know what it’s like.”

“You’re correct in that I’ve never felt what you’re going through. But, I think I understand it,” he said slowly. “So, what about forgiveness?” he asked again – this time a bit more purposefully.

“I don’t know,” I said, throwing a tissue into the trash can, “But I still think it’s important.”

“I do too,” he said. “Let’s meet again in a few days.” I looked at the clock, and it was two minutes before the hour. He had broken another rule, and kept me overtime.

“Hang in there, Andy,” he said, and patted me on the back.

“My, but you’re breaking all kinds of rules today,” I said sarcastically.

“Yup,” is all The Oracle said. But, he was smiling.

First one door, and then the other opened. My eyes were red, and I blew my nose. The next patient, sitting in the waiting room, looked suspiciously at me.

“Allergies,” I said.

Chapter 22

The next morning when the alarm sounded, Terese was there in my dream, smiling. This time, she was moving her head a bit from side to side, but didn't say anything to me. I tried to say something to her, and the alarm nudged me awake.

I turned on the TV while I was eating breakfast, and the news continued to be filled with an update of the recount of the presidential election. The anchor said, “The recount in Ohio is now complete, and Governor Stonegate is the clear winner there. In Pennsylvania, she actually has increased her lead over Vice President Mooring by one hundred twelve votes. Many of the absentee ballots were from servicemen stationed overseas, and her strong support among those voters strengthened her lead. Her camp made this comment earlier today.” I looked at the screen, and there was John Sturgis, looking a bit more rested, but still unkempt for a spokesman.

“President Elect Stonegate continues to make plans for her upcoming administration, and we are reassured by her growing lead in Pennsylvania. This was a very close election, indeed, but it appears more and more certain that President Elect Stonegate will be taking office.”

The anchor added that Mooring was running out of options, and while he has not totally conceded, he continued to be gracious as always.

The news anchor then ran a piece on the view of the election around the world. Many commentators from other countries who had already elected a woman president such as India, Great Britain, Pakistan, Brazil, Ireland and Israel commented they weren't sure what took America so long to elect a woman. "We knew the Americans would get around to it, eventually" said a member of the Irish Parliament with a brogue and a smile.

The foreign minister from Syria was much less sanguine. "We, in Syria desire peace, and we are dismayed by the new militant talk coming out of America," he said.

The anchor followed with news that "Militants in Syria have condemned the tough talk from America at the same time some of these same groups praised the terrorist attack in New York just before the election." Next came the weather, and it was getting colder, we were warned.

I pulled myself into my car, and returned to the Schuylkill Expressway. The traffic warning sign predicted a smooth ride, saying, "Vine St. 5 miles, 7 minutes". I was not so sure.

Finally at work, I met with Barbara, and the unit closures were progressing faster than expected. Many of the experienced nurses quickly found jobs elsewhere, and a group of seven of the nurses from the same shift went en masse to another medical floor of Philadelphia State. “At this rate, we’ll be closed by Thanksgiving,” Barbara said.

“We should try to stay open as long as we can to enable the remaining staff to get a paycheck as the ship sinks,” I said.

“It’ll be tough without nurses,” was all she said.

Over the next days, life began to settle into a routine like that. I monitored the staff abandoning the units, and we resolved to admit those folks we would have turned away before. There did not seem to be a shortage of people drifting into the emergency room looking for a warm bed, and they found their way to the psychiatry unit for now. We would never have admitted those folks before, but this was a different game. At home, I developed a similar routine of eating, taking a walk, and then checking in on ESPN before going to bed. Sleep was coming a bit easier now. But, this night, I tossed and turned a bit more, realizing that I would be meeting with The Oracle tomorrow afternoon.

Chapter 23

I made sure I was on time for this visit with The Oracle, and I arrived a bit early. But, I always was a bit nervous sitting here in his waiting room. It was like waiting in the principals' office, not knowing what you did wrong. Being a grown man, and a psychiatrist to boot, that feeling did not go away. I passed the time by looking around the waiting room, at the empty chairs, and the art that seemed just to be dropped there. It was all clutter, and didn't make sense to me.

The doors opened to his office, and The Oracle appeared in the door. This time, though, he didn't say anything, and just motioned for me to come into his office.

I sat down, and then he sat down. He looked at me, and then looked away.

I wondered what to say, and then said, "I keep having this dream as I'm waking up that I see Terese smiling at me. She never says anything, and as a try to talk to her, I wake up." The Oracle continued to look at me. "I try to reach out and make contact with her, but she just smiles, and then my alarm goes off, and I start the day."

"What does it feel like to reach out and not be successful in being there for her?" The Oracle asked.

“What do you mean- not being successful?” I asked- a bit perturbed.

“Well, last time you said you wished you were there for her at the time of the explosion,” The Oracle deadpanned.

“I know,” I said looking down. “Look, I know it doesn’t make sense, but I feel I should have been there for her, to do something, to help her, or at least to be there for her,” I continued, a bit hesitantly.

He just looked at me.

“I keep thinking that if I had delayed her departure from the house, forced her to take another train, driven her to New York myself or something, we’d still be together and this awful thing wouldn’t have happened to us,” I said.

“How could you have known?” The Oracle replied slowly.

“Look, I know there is no way to predict the future, but I keep thinking that I should have done something,” I said quickly.

The Oracle wrote something down on his notebook. He looked up and said, “So, do you think her death is at all your fault?”

“No, of course not. I didn’t blow her up,” I said quickly.

He continued to stare at me. "But I still think I should have done something," I said, trying to sound reasonable.

"Do you think you should have saved her?" The Oracle said slowly.

"Don't be silly," I said. "I mean, I wish I could have saved her, but I know I couldn't."

"But you still think of ways you could have intervened," he said. I nodded, and could feel the tear in the corner of my eye.

"I just miss her so," I said.

The Oracle continued to stare at me.

"Look, I know we have gone over and over how I felt that I should have done something about the death of my father when I was a kid, and blamed myself for my mother withdrawing," I said. "But, this is different."

Those eyes over that white beard continued to look at me.

"This really is different," I said back to him, and his notepad. I looked out his window, and those red drapes did seem old. They had been there for a long time, and they were still covering the same window, the same old stuff.

I looked at him. He stared at me. "I don't know. Maybe it's not different," I finally said.

He nodded, and looked at me. “It’s the same, and it’s different,” he said.

“That’s brilliant, Sherlock,” I added sarcastically.

The Oracle allowed himself half a smile, and continued. “Even though on many levels, you have resolved and understand the death of your father when you were young, those feelings are still there ready to jump,” he said.

“Do you mean, lingering in my ... unconscious...” I said deliberately, and let my fingers jump around theatrically with that last word. He tolerated that. “Or is it that my neurons were entrained to respond in that way. Or is it that I got into a habit of thinking that way,” I asked.

“Probably ‘Yes’ to all of them,” he said patiently.

“It makes sense that you would think that you may be to blame, considering the losses in your past. But you know, everybody at a sudden loss like the one you’ve experienced thinks the same things,” The Oracle added, and his eyes locked onto mine.

“What do you mean everybody does,” I asked.

“Terrible things happen in life, and they happen to all kinds of people – good people, bad people and in-between people. When they do happen, we all try to make sense of it. That’s the way we’re built.”

“We try to make sense of the world. We try to come up with some kind of an idea that makes sense - that makes it seem like we have some control over the things that happened to us, and more importantly to the things that will happen to us. So, it’s common for people to think, ‘If only I would have done this or that’, or ‘If I were there...’ or ‘I should have been able to do...’” and The Oracle paused for a second. “You see, people want to think they have control over things, over their life. The alternative, and the truth is, that we don’t have control over a lot of the things that happen. That fact, that much of life is out of our control frightens the living daylight out of us.” The Oracle paused again, this time for a minute or so. “The truth is you didn’t have control over what happened to Terese. It was terrible. It did happen. And, there was nothing you could have done.”

I felt shocked, and then teared up again. “I wish I could have done something,” I finally said.

“I wish you could have too,” The Oracle said with some compassion.

“You see, people would rather think that they have some control, and it’s their fault rather than admit that many things in life are totally out of their control.”

The Oracle paused for a moment, and then continued, "It's, in a way, easier to think you are powerful but bad or faulty in some way than realize that you're not as powerful as you think you are...that you had no control over losing Terese then, and that you'll be out of control of much of what happens to you in the future," he continued.

I exhaled deeply. I felt lighter somehow. "But do you mean I can't control anything?" I said slowly.

"There are many things in life that you have control over, and each person must run and manage their own life. Still, there are many things that happen out of the blue. This was one of those things," he said. "The key," The Oracle continued, "is to manage the things that happen to you the best you can, not to control them, or to think that you have control...if only this or that would have happened," he added

I knew that there was nothing I could do, but it was still hard to accept. "You're right," I said, "I still blamed myself somehow."

"I know," The Oracle said.

I looked out at the window again, at the light streaming into the room past those old drapes.

"What about forgiveness," The Oracle asked.

“I should try to do it,” I quickly said with all the resolve I could muster.

“How?” he said.

I was still dumbfounded. I must have looked like one of the African statuettes in his waiting room with the big head staring out.

“You should try forgiveness,” The Oracle said, “but it comes in steps.”

I looked at him, not knowing where he was going with this one.

“The first step is to realize that you were wronged,” he said. “That’s sure true,” I said quickly.

He nodded, and added, “The next step is to fully assign blame on the person who did it, not yourself. You have to realize that you had no control, and that something was done to you, or to someone you care about.” I stared away from him.

“I loved her so much,” I said.

“I know, but that still couldn’t save her,” The Oracle said firmly, boring into me. “Do you know who did this to you?” the Oracle asked. “Well, I don’t know specifically, but it was the terrorists.” I said cautiously.

“And you had no control over it, over her or over the situation?” The Oracle asked quickly.

I stopped, and all the thoughts of “I should have...” or “I could have...” or “if only I’d...” flashed through my mind. Several minutes passed. I quietly said, “No, I had no control. I couldn’t have done anything.”

“Right,” The Oracle said. “So, now you know who was wrong. Now you know who to forgive.”

“I suppose so,” I said.

“That is why your soundbyte on the news was so powerful. You jumped four steps ahead,” he said.

“I guess I’m just catching up,” I added.

“So now what,” I asked.

“You’ve recognized, and assigned blame,” he said.

“Yes,” I said slowly.

“And you don’t blame yourself?” The Oracle asked.

“No,” I said.

The Oracle looked at me, and said “I don’t fully believe that, but you’re on your way.”

“So now what,” I asked again.

He stared at me with those eyes, and his white hair seemed to recede even more. He waited for me to take the next step.

“Well...” I said. “I guess I forgive them for their wrong. I refuse to allow them to have power over me now.”

They can't hurt me worse than they already have done," I added.

The Oracle only stared at me.

"And, I guess I move on in my life," I said.

"Without her?" he said.

I thought that was almost cruel, and I stared back at him. His stare, though had more resolve. "Yes, without her," I said, and I started to cry softly.

"I miss her, though," I sobbed.

"You'll always miss her. The good part of that is that you have many wonderful memories. The bad part is that she and you won't be able to create any new ones," The Oracle said. "That is the two sides of grief," he added.

"So, how do I get to forgiveness," I asked.

The Oracle nodded. Assigning blame is just the first step. The next step, as you say is to deny that they have power over you now.

"Enough with them, how about me?" I added quickly.

"Exactly," The Oracle replied. "The next steps have to do with you." He paused, but continued to look directly at me, as I squirmed in my chair. "Can you remember the past – but more than that, can you remember the past and enjoy the memories?"

I looked down. "Not yet," I said slowly.

"That will come," The Oracle said. "And then, as you are doing that, you gradually develop new plans, new relationships. You remember and treasure the past, and move on with the present and then the future," he said calmly. "That's forgiveness."

"That's it?" I said, somewhat surprised.

"That's most of it," he smiled. "But, in the process, you also recognize your own strengths that got you this far, that got you through this. You appreciate that you are stronger, wiser, ...better. That's the tail end of forgiveness," he said. "That's why it's important to forgive."

"You mean I don't have to worry about my soul," I said somewhat sarcastically.

The Oracle turned his lips up in mild exasperation. "You can worry about your soul if you want, and Lord knows there's enough to worry about," he added playfully. "But, I'd take care of you first," he added.

I just nodded, and blew my nose. I looked at the clock. It was ten minutes before the hour. "We'll meet again in a week or so," he said.

He stood up, and walked to the door. He opened first one door, and then the other. I waited until both doors were open, and then slowly walked to the door.

He closed the door behind me. I just stood there for a few minutes.

“You know, the background of the water lilies in that Monet print have the same color as Terese’s eyes,” I thought to myself.

Chapter 24

The next weeks seemed to go by quickly. More of the staff left the unit. The more experienced staff had no trouble finding jobs either at other wards at Philadelphia State, or in other wards around town. The psychiatrists over whom I had direct supervision read the writing on the walls and began exiting too.

At my next meeting with the hospital accountants, they noticed that the unit census was half what it usually was, and suggested that the unit close at Thanksgiving. After I objected, they agreed to pay whatever staff remained December's pay as a severance. I walked to the unit, and met with the staff and Barbara, and shared that news. As I unlocked the door of the unit, it was more quiet than usual. There were fewer patients, less staff, and less chaos. I talked with Barbara about the latest change in schedule.

"At least people will get some money before Christmas," she said. "So, they really are going to shut things down," she added, looking out the window.

"Yup, they really are," was all I could say. I noticed Barbara had a tear in her eye.

“We did so much for so many people for so long, it’s just hard to let it go,” she said. “The fact that they keep changing the schedule doesn’t help,” she said.

I simply nodded. Then, angrily, she added, “Damn those weasels.”

Smiling, I added, “Atta girl.”

She smiled back and looked out into the day room. “I will miss this place, and this job,” she said.

“So, how are you doing,” I asked.

“Oh, I’ll be fine,” she said, not entirely convincingly. “I have a new job to go to, and that will offer a new challenge. But, once you’ve built something, it’s hard to see it taken from you.”

I nodded in knowing agreement.

“So how are you doing,” she asked, looking me in the eyes.

“Not great, but better,” I said. “I can sleep most nights. I’m eating better. I don’t think of Terese all the time now. So, I guess I’m better,” I added. Barbara gave me a hug, and I gave her a hug back. “Hang in there,” I told her. “I’m hanging,” she quickly replied.

As I entered the hospital ward dayroom, the TV was blaring noise, of course. The television news anchor said to no one in particular, “The Pennsylvania recount for the general election has been completed, and that insures that Governor Stonegate will take the electoral college ballot, and become the next President of the United States.

The anchor paused for effect and then added, “Vice President Mooring delivered this statement earlier today.”

The scene on TV switched to the White House, where Mooring was wearing his blue suit, and white shirt. He was wearing a striped tie, now, though, and the American Flag lapel pin was missing. “It is now clear that Governor Stonegate won the election, and I have instructed my staff to cease all efforts to appeal the vote in all states. I called Governor Stonegate, and again offered my congratulations, as well as my offer to help her in any way possible as she begins her new administration,” Mooring added graciously. He looked tired, and a bit older. Standing in front of the White House, which housed his office over the last eight years was bittersweet.

One of the reporters shouted out, “So what will you do now, Mr. Vice President?”

Mooring looked surprised, and then said, “Give my golf game the time it deserves.”

The anchor returned to the TV picture, and said, “President elect Stonegate received the news of the electoral college count very matter of factly. Here are her comments.”

They switched to a scene of Amanda Stonegate standing under the big Montana sky on her ranch.

“We continue to make preparations for the new administration. Vice President elect Smithson and I are working hard to get our team together to start making a difference from Day One,” President Elect Stonegate said firmly. “We’ve been working all along to make America safe, and we will be ready to continue that work in January,” she finished.

The wind blew her hair back a bit, and she nodded to the camera and walked back toward her house, as the anchor said, “President Elect Stonegate will have a busy few weeks ahead as she prepares for the inauguration.”

As I was walking toward the door, the anchor switched to the next topic. “Matters continue to be unsettled in the Middle East. Factions in Syria continue to vie for control, and President Ali Hameen is trying to maintain power. Some groups are actively and openly supporting terrorist attacks on the United States and Israel, and Hameen is saying that Syria does not support such actions. Exactly who is in control there remains a question.”

I put my head down, and unlocked the door. I made my way to my office. I didn’t want hear anything more about terrorists or Middle East turmoil just now.

I felt bad for Barbara, and bad for me.

My unanswered email list was growing, and I set about deleting and answering email in seemingly random fashion. But then, my cell phone rang, and looking down at it, I didn’t recognize the number.

“Hello, I’m Dr. West,” I said formally.

“Good morning, Dr. West, this is John Sturgis with the Stonegate administration. How are you today, sir,” he replied.

I was shocked, and tilted back in my chair. “Well, congratulations to you guys. You did it,” I mumbled into the phone.

“No Sir, we’re just making plans to do it, to work on things. That’s why I’m calling you today. You are being considered for a position in the Stonegate administration, and I wanted to ask your permission for us to do a background check,” he said.

“What! What position??” I said loudly, almost falling off my chair.

“Yes Sir, President Elect Stonegate was very impressed with you, and her impression was amplified during her meeting with you before the election, and she is wondering if you would consider being a special advisor to the President on Health Affairs,” he said plainly.

“Do you guys know I’m a democrat? I even ran for congress years ago as a democrat,” I said fumbling for something to say.

“Yes sir, we know. We are opening the administration up to as many points of view as possible, and the fact that you had a taste of politics in the past makes you more valuable to us,” he said.

“Would this be a full time job,” I asked, my head swimming. “Sir, at this time we anticipate that the position as an advisor to the president would not be a full time position, but you would need to be very available to the President,” he said.

“That seems a bit different,” I said. “Yes Sir, I understand, but at this point, we would like to be able to consider you for the position. If it is all right with you, we will do a background check, and then invite you to Montana for a fuller interview over the next week or so,” Sturgis added.

I shook my head. “Investigate away,” I said, “and let me know if you find out anything juicy.” “I look forward to meeting with you soon,” Sturgis replied. “Thank you sir,” he concluded.

Dumbfounded, I stared into my empty office. The metal desk with its rusted edge stared back at me.

The polyester chairs where Amanda Stonegate and I met a few weeks ago were there too. I wondered what a “special advisor” did. Then looking at my shrinking email list, it occurred to me that things here at Philadelphia State were going to get a whole lot less busy for me in short order too. “Well, what have I gotten myself into this time,” I thought to myself with a smile.

Chapter 25

The alarm again interrupted my dream of Terese. She once again was just there smiling. In these dreams, she never said anything, and I always tried to say something to her. The alarm seemed to always interrupt me. The dreams were happening less now, but I almost enjoyed them. It was good seeing her, even in a dream, as strange as that seems.

A week and a half passed since Sturgis called me, and yesterday, he called again, urging me to meet with him and a representative from Vice President elect Smithson's camp in their transition offices in Helena, Montana at the State Capitol. The Stonegate administration transition team took over part of the capitol complex, and the Governor, now President Elect, was making the transition to the White House from there. My meeting with Sturgis wasn't until tomorrow, but it would take most of today to make the plane changes necessary to get to Helena from Philadelphia.

It was late afternoon by the time I reached Helena. Mid-November in Montana is already winter, and I realized immediately leaving the airline terminal that I did not dress warmly enough. Shivering in the cold outside the Helena air terminal, I wondered how else I was not prepared.

Helena is a very small town, and I was quickly able to get one of the three cabs waiting at the departure door of the airport to take me to my hotel room. As I took the short drive to the hotel, it struck me that Helena was also a very lovely town. The glaciers that sculpted the geography of much of the west rolled up at the edge of Helena. To the east, the land was completely flat, and to the west were the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The state capitol was on flat land, but the hills leading to the mountains were visible in the background. Here was the beginning of things-the prairie to the east and the mountains to the west. The pace of life also seemed slower than the bustle of the east coast.

The cab driver told me that lots of people from out of town had been arriving since the election, and he wondered if I was looking for a job too. All I could say was I would have to let him know about that. He referred me to a good steak restaurant, and I appreciated his advice. I ate, and then went to my hotel room. It occurred to me that I should probably prepare for my interview, and got out a yellow pad and a pen and sat down at the hotel room desk. I could think of nothing to write down.

I was still perplexed why Sturgis had called me, and even more perplexed about what a “special advisor to the president” would do.

Turning away from the yellow pad, I turned on ESPN before going to bed. “I guess I’ll find out tomorrow,” I thought.

The next morning, I entered the state capitol grounds off North Montana Avenue in Helena forty-five minutes ahead of my appointment. It turns out that traffic in Helena was different too. I picked up a brochure from the visitor’s desk under the capitol rotunda, and looked around. The state capitol looked like many state capitols, with the architecture borrowing heavily from the United States Capitol in Washington. On top of the Montana State Capitol dome, was a stone statue of a woman who had been nicknamed, “Lady Liberty” over the years. The Montana press had renamed her “Lady Stonegate” over the last few years and they said Governor Amanda Stonegate watched over the state budget and the state legislature from there.

Entering the building, there was a massive rotunda featuring prominent paintings of Native Americans, western explorers and gold miners, and of course- cowboys. In front of one of the paintings stood a statue of Jeanette Rankin, the Montana woman who became the first woman elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. I went over to the statue, and tapped Jeanette on the foot.

I wondered what this icon of Montana politics would be thinking now of the first woman president of the United States who also hailed from Montana.

The time for my meeting came, and I was ushered into a room with John Sturgis and another man. Sturgis looked better rested than the last time I saw him, but he was still ruffled, with his sleeves rolled up, and the top button of his shirt was undone with his tie a bit off to the right.

“Hello again, Dr. West,” he said cordially, “It’s good to see you.” He turned, and said, “This is Frank Asbury, who worked with Vice President Smithson for many years in Washington.” Asbury was dressed in the requisite blue suit, but his cuff links seemed to be a bit out of place in Helena.

“Good to meet you, Dr. West,” he said plainly, and they showed me to a seat in the room.

“Thank you for coming to meet with us Dr. West,” John Sturgis said, “We have completed the background check on you, and would like to go ahead with the interview.”

“Sure,” I said, “That’s why I’m here.”

Sturgis gave me a weak smile, while Asbury frowned deeply into his yellow legal pad.

Asbury turned to me, and said, “Dr. West, we understand that Philadelphia State is shutting down the psychiatry units that you run. Why is that?” he asked.

“The medical school is losing money. Psychiatry doesn’t make money these days, and they figure they need to make more money to keep the school afloat. They’re not going to get that from psychiatry,” I said.

“Other schools have psychiatry programs, so why do they feel the need to close yours?” Asbury asked again and narrowed his eyes at me a bit.

“Other schools probably have more money,” I answered. “Philadelphia State is in a poor area of Philadelphia, and our clients in psychiatry are often poor, or disabled, or addicted to drugs or most often all three. I think the administration believes they can’t make a profit on them, and the rest of the hospital can’t support that work anymore,” I said.

Asbury looked at me. “You give us your permission to contact the administration of Philadelphia State to ask them about that, I assume,” he said.

“Sure,” I said. This was not a friendly guy. I looked at Sturgis, and he studied his paper.

“Dr. West, also, I understand that you ran for congress several years ago from Lancaster County, home in

Pennsylvania,” Asbury said, looking at his sheet.

“Yes, that’s right,” I said.

“How did you do in the election?” he asked.

I glared at him. Even a cursory look into my past would provide the election results showing that I lost not by a landslide, but by a rockslide as well. “I got pummeled,” I said.

“Why was that,” Asbury asked with a straight face.

“The good people of Lancaster County didn’t like me, or they liked the incumbent better, or probably both,” I said with some growing irritation.

“Dr. West, how often have you supported republicans in the past in elections?” Asbury asked. Sturgis continued to study his paper.

“That’s easy. Never,” I said quickly.

John Sturgis jumped in, “So why did you decide to vote for President Stonegate?” he said, trying to throw me a softball.

“As you know, I met with her just after my wife was murdered by terrorists. I was struck by the fact that she was concerned for me. Talking with her, I really did sense that she was concerned for me, and for my loss. I was touched. That’s why she got my vote and my support,” I told Sturgis.

“You know that Stonegate then announced your support to the country just before the election,” Asbury said.

“Of course,” I said.

“What did you think of that?” Asbury continued.

I paused. I wanted to say that I wished my wife had never been killed and that Asbury would go away. But, I said, “I understand that Governor Stonegate is concerned about national security, and the bombing in which my wife was killed was a traumatic event not only for me but also for the country. I understand that she used her interview with me to emphasize that point,” I said professionally.

“Are you saying she used you?” Asbury said with a bite.

“No, she used that personal story to emphasize a point as I’m sure she related other stories from people she met throughout the campaign,” I said.

“So, were you used?” Asbury asked again.

“No sir, she won my vote,” I said curtly. “An election is decided by people, and stories from people help focus the issues for the people.”

Sturgis smiled, and Asbury began shuffling his papers. He asked, “Dr. West, is there anything you could do that would embarrass the president?”

“Probably,” I said.

Sturgis laughed out loud, and then began coughing, and finally grabbed a tissue to cover his face.

“What do you mean?” Asbury said with some astonishment.

“I think we all could do things that would be embarrassing, or that wouldn’t be entirely appropriate,” I said, staring at him.

“Dr. West, I know you’re a psychiatrist, but I’m not asking for an analysis of human behavior,” Asbury quickly said, throwing his paper on the desk.

“Yes, sir. I am a psychiatrist, and I’m proud of that,” was all I could think of to sling back at him.

There was silence in the room. Both men seemed to find their papers very interesting at this point.

“Dr. West, there is a personal question that I want to ask you,” Sturgis said slowly. “Have you really forgiven the terrorists?”

“I think I’m on my way,” I said. “I know I have to forgive in order to move on with my life, and I truly think I’m getting there.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss, Sir,” was all Sturgis could reply.

Both men looked at each other.

Asbury then said, "Thank you for meeting with us. We'll be in touch." Sturgis shook my hand, and showed me to the door.

I walked out the room, and headed for the capitol rotunda. I loosened my tie, and exhaled. As I passed the statue of Jeannette Rankin, I patted her foot again, and said, "Jeannette, I don't think I'll be joining you in Washington."

Chapter 26

Several weeks passed, and the inpatient units were now about to close. Barbara handled it as efficiently as she did everything else. When the last patient left, we both walked through the units. One of the patients took the opportunity to draw graffiti all over the wall of his room a week ago, and it didn't seem worthwhile to clean it up. The graffiti was still there on the wall, featuring a mixed jumble of words and images as a fitting exit for the units. The television blared noise nonstop as it always did, even though no one was there to listen.

The anchor on the news channel was babbling on. "President Hameen in Syria continues to struggle with an array of factions, each seeking power. Hameen today addressed a cheering crowd, and we have some comments from him. The camera switched to a marketplace in Damascus. He was standing on the back of a pickup truck with crowds of people dressed in white all around. He was pumping his right fist in the air.

"We will not stand for American imperialism. The west will learn that we will not tolerate their disregard for our way of life," Hameen called out to the crowd. The crowd roared back their approval in return.

“I’ve had enough of that,” I told Barbara, and went over and finally turned off the TV.

We were both about to close the door of the units, and I told Barbara to wait. I ran over to the wall, and removed a sign in a broken frame which decorated that wall for as long I could remember. The sign said, “We’re here to help you be who you can be. Ask us questions.” I gave it to Barbara, and said, “This sign always reminded me of you. I can’t imagine it without you.” I gave her a hug, and gave it to her before her eyes filled with tears for a moment. We closed the doors to the unit, but didn’t lock the door. There was no point.

We looked at each other, and again I thanked her for everything – all her work with the patients, the support she gave me when I arrived more than a little green a decade ago, and for the personal support she gave me over the last month and a half. “You did help me be who I can be. Thanks for that,” I said.

“I’d hate to take credit for that,” she smiled.

The rest of the day followed uneventfully. I waded through my email, and it was easy to tear myself away from that later. I had a follow up appointment with The Oracle that afternoon, and I mentally prepared for it. But, while I was emerging from the quicksand, I was still quite stuck.

Entering the Schuylkill Expressway, on the way to the Oracle's office, the traffic warning sign above the expressway said, "City Ave – 12 miles, 13 minutes". It promised smooth sailing to the office, and thankfully, the sign was correct this time. I arrived on time, and as I entered the outer office, he opened the door. I quickly took the smaller chair across from his.

He looked at me. The hair was still parted in the middle, and his beard looked as if he had a trim since the last time we met.

"The dreams about Terese are happening less than before," I said.

He continued to look, and then he said, "Is that good?"

"I think so," was what I decided was the best answer. "I always like to see her, even in my dreams, but I think I need to move on," I said.

"So, how are your moving on?" the Oracle said.

"Well, a few things. I just closed down the inpatient units at Philadelphia State, and I'm surviving that, so far. I also looked into another job in Washington, but the interview didn't go so well," I concluded.

"It sounds like you didn't behave yourself," The Oracle said and smiled at me.

“I wasn’t too bad, but they came at me,” was how I quickly replied.

“Well, that’s the big leagues,” The Oracle advised. “They will come at you with their best stuff. You’ll have to expect that.”

“I guess I can forgive them for that,” I said.

“How are you coming with the forgiveness,” he asked.

“I truly think I’m doing better. I don’t cry as much. I mean, I think about Terese all the time, but now when I think of her, it’s more in the past tense. I still think I see her in the distance in a crowd sometimes, and sometimes at home I want to go into the next room to ask her something before I realize she’s not there. But, overall, I’m OK,” I said with some reflection.

The Oracle continued to look at me.

“I did want to tell you, though. I was surprised to hear you say the last time that there is so much that is out of our control. Don’t analysts think that everything is in our unconscious, and we can be freed from all of that?” I asked.

“Certainly, a substantial amount of our behavior is on autodrive from our unconscious,” The Oracle commented pedantically.

“But vast amounts of life happen to us without warning, or without cause. The trick is to manage events the best we can. We can’t change a lot of things, but the key is to manage what we can in life, and maybe learn from it,” The Oracle said as he continued on with his soliloquy.

I was quiet for a long time, but I felt comfortable. The Oracle maintained his silence, too. Ordinarily, these silences made me uncomfortable, but now, I was content to sit there and enjoy the peace I could feel now growing inside of me.

Finally, he said, “So now that the units are closed, what will you do at Philadelphia State?”

“That’s a good question,” I said. “Half of the staff either left, or will be gone in a few months, and Philadelphia State will need someone to teach the medical students. I can do that. I have some grants to finish up, and then I don’t know. I’ll have to manage it,” I said smiling.

The Oracle smiled and shook his head. “You are incorrigible,” he said, wagging his finger at me with a bigger smile.

Our time was up, and I was freed of the inner sanctum exiting first one door, and then the other. No one was waiting yet in his waiting room, and I took the elevator downstairs.

In the lobby of his building, my cell phone rang again. The voice on the other end said, “Dr. West, this is John Sturgis. How are you doing today, Sir?” he said.

“I’m doing fine. How are things in Montana?” I said cordially.

“Busy,” was his brief reply. “Dr. West, we did appreciate you coming to interview with us. We would like to have you come to Helena for a second interview, and this time to meet with President Elect Stonegate. She would like to meet with you as part of the interview process for the new administration.”

I was quite surprised. “Well, Ok. When should I come?” I said.

“Can you make it here by late tomorrow afternoon?” he asked.

“I’m sure I can,” I said with even more surprise.

“Good, President Elect Stonegate will see you in her office at the State Capitol at 5 p.m. Helena time, Sir. I will meet you in the outer office first,” Sturgis said.

“Thank you, Mr. Sturgis, I’ll meet you then,” was my quick reply.

I felt like quite the operator, jumping on a plane again to meet with the Presidential transition team. I was surprised to be returning to Montana for another visit.

Still, I had no clear idea of what a “special advisor” would do, or even what I would talk about tomorrow. I had the definite feeling that I was stepping out of one pit into another. But, I had to go, to try to do something. Winston Churchill advised, “When you find yourself going through hell, keep moving.”

When I drove home, it was already getting dark, and the sky was grey marking the beginning of December. I quickly ate, and then booked myself into the early morning flight out of Philadelphia, which left at 6 a.m. That would manage to get me into Helena by 3 p.m. if the all connections would work. The only good thing about my department at Philadelphia State falling apart is that I had lots of free time to pursue other things.

I put on a jacket, and walked around the house, and stopped at the back garden. “Terese, I don’t know what’s going on here, but I do need something to fill my time, and I’ll see what happens in Montana,” I said out loud to the grey sky. The sun was already down, and it was getting chilly. “It’ll be colder than this in Montana,” I thought to myself, thinking I needed to be more prepared for this visit.

Before I woke at 3:30 a.m. to make it to the airport, I was again dreaming of Terese. It felt warm, comforting to see her, even in my dreams.

Again, she was smiling at me, but this time, she turned to me, and said, "Take care of yourself Andy," and then she turned away. I tried to reach out for her, but the alarm sounded breaking me away from her.

Chapter 27

Arriving at the Helena Airport, I could see the foothills of the Rocky Mountains just a short distance away. December brought snow to the mountains, and Helena already was dusted with snow as well. The Rocky Mountains looked even more majestic sprinkled with snow, and even more intimidating in the distance.

I felt better prepared for this trip, and pulled my winter coat tightly around me. I grabbed the one available cab outside the airport, and soon I was on North Montana Avenue approaching the state capitol.

“You see Lady Liberty on top of the capitol up there?” the cabbie asked. “They say that she’s crying and ice has already frozen under her eyes now that Stonegate is leaving us. There was a picture in the paper showing that anyhow,” he said.

I didn’t know that statues could cry, but said, “I imagine the statue has been through worse than this.”

The cabbie agreed, but quickly added, “Yeah, but we’ll miss her here in Helena.”

We turned off North Montana Avenue onto the driveway leading to the state capitol. I exited the cab and quickly entered the capitol rotunda to avoid the December wind outside.

I still had forty five minutes until my appointment and again marveled at the paintings decorating all sides of the rotunda as I looked up. I wandered around and again found myself gazing up at the statue of Jeannette Rankin, the first woman elected to congress.

My mind drifted a bit. At Harvard, there is a tradition that Harvard undergraduates rub the foot of the statue of John Harvard sitting overlooking Harvard yard, for good luck. The perpetually young students rub his left foot in the hope that luck will give them the boost they may need to succeed in their tests at Harvard. John Harvard is there, sitting on his pedestal, looking out into the quad where generations of America's leaders passed under his watchful eye. He has a stern look on his face, sitting there monitoring the students rushing to class as well as the Frisbee and football tossing in the quad.

The statue is tarnished, and decorated with rust and bird droppings. But, his left foot is polished to a shine from the generations of undergrads rubbing it for good luck on their way to take a test. My musings about Harvard yard ended as I looked up here in the rotunda of the Montana state capitol and saw the statue of Jeanette Rankin, dressed in her plain long dress, looking like an elementary school teacher peering down at me.

I rubbed her left foot. I would need all the help I could get to pass the test I was about to enter with the President Elect of the United States.

Finally, I found my way to the governor's chambers in the state capitol complex, and entered the outer office.

The offices were charming, filled with carved wood and antiques. The scene though was chaotic. Staffers from both the transition team and the governor's office seemed to be fighting for space and attention. All of the chairs, and seemingly all of the space were taken. I stood by the door and probably looked as confused as the setting. Suddenly, next to me appeared John Sturgis, disheveled as always with his sleeves rolled up. He was wearing a button down blue shirt with only one collar buttoned down, but no tie completed his outfit this time. "Dr. West," he said, "Thank you for coming. We can go this way."

We exited the room and went down the next hallway, which was thankfully quieter. We entered a small office with a desk pushed against the wall, piled with papers surrounding a computer. There were two folding metal chairs, and he offered me one.

Sturgis took the other chair, and smiled. I removed my coat, saying, "I was surprised you called me back. I didn't think your friend Frank Asbury liked me too much."

"He didn't, and you should watch your back, Sir," Sturgis quickly replied.

"So why am I here?" I asked. "Because the President-elect wants you, and I think she's making a good decision," Sturgis said, looking carefully at me.

"But, want me for what?" I wondered out loud.

"We would like to offer you a position as 'Special Advisor to the President on Health Affairs.' The position will only be part time. You'll be expected to be in Washington one day a week, and you'll be paid through a grant from the budget of the National Institute of Mental Health. We assume you'll have some preparation time, and so we will cover 25% of your salary for the position. You'll be able to continue your work at the Philadelphia State School of Medicine for the remainder of the week, but we will need you in Washington one day a week," he said rather formally.

“That shouldn’t be a problem, but what does a special advisor to the President actually do?” I asked, now more confused than ever.

“President-elect Stonegate will explain that to you, Sir. But, you need to know that officially, you’ll be working through the National Institute of Mental Health on a grant. You and your school cannot announce your appointment, or your work.”

Sturgis paused, choosing his words very carefully. He lowered his voice, and added, “Your position must be totally confidential. If anyone asks, you can simply tell them that you have to go to NIMH for your grant work,” Sturgis added, and I could feel his eyes bearing into mine.

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” I said. “Philadelphia State is getting rid of their inpatient psychiatry units. I have the time, and in academia, getting a grant from the NIMH carries a special status, and travelling to Washington to work with them is thought to be a bigger honor. So, I don’t think that would be a problem,” I added, feeling a bit sheepish about all the cloak and dagger stuff. “Still, it would be helpful if I knew what I was supposed to do,” I added.

“Yes, Sir. The President-Elect will explain that to you in your meeting with her today,” Sturgis quickly added.

He sat there, and simply looked at me. He was not well dressed, but there was certainly an air of control, as well as strength and calm about him. I always thought he was smart, and a very able politician, but I was getting the sense now that I shouldn't cross him, ever.

The silence continued.

Finally, I asked, "So how did you get into this business?" as much to kill time as to settle my curiosity.

"I grew up on the Rocky Boys Indian Reservation outside of Havre, Montana," Sturgis started to explain. "I did well in school, but I was also blessed with the ability to play football. At the end of my high school days, I got a full scholarship to play at Stanford, and left the reservation when I was 18 to go to Stanford to play football. I graduated from Stanford in 2001, but when 9/11 hit, I signed up for the Navy, and then became a Navy Seal. After tours in Afghanistan, and then Iraq, I came back home. When I returned home to the Rez, I talked with my Dad about what I should do next. He was one of the tribal leaders who worked with President-Elect Stonegate and the tribe when she was suing Axis Oil. He told me that she was a good person, and I should help her out. I've been working for her ever since," he said simply.

“So you’re part of the Cree tribe?” I asked with growing astonishment.

“No, Sir. I’m part of the Chippewa tribe actually. We share the reservation lands,” he answered, watching me carefully.

He continued to look at me. This guy used silence as an interview technique as much as The Oracle. I looked away, and then looked back at him and asked, “What position did you play at Stanford?”

“I was a free safety,” he said. “It was my job to protect the deep part of the field.”

He stared at me again.

“I think the President-Elect will have a few minutes to meet with you now, Sir. Let’s go down the hall to her office,” Sturgis said. He stopped at his door, blocking my exit, and said, “You take good care of her, Sir,” and looked me straight in the eye for a full fifteen seconds before opening the door.

I followed Sturgis for our short walk down the hallway, and Sturgis opened the right side of double doors which read "Office of the Governor". Chaos reigned there as well, but Sturgis walked through the melee, and opened the next set of doors. There sat Amanda Stonegate, sitting behind a large ornate wooden desk that seemed to dwarf her. Again, I was struck by how small she appeared in person. But, the second thing that quickly grabbed my mind was how very attractive she was. She was wearing a flannel shirt with the shirt tails hanging out over her denim jeans. Her auburn hair was combed off to one side, and a wisp of it fell onto her face, which made her look a bit younger. She looked like she could be walking off a ski slope, and she certainly looked younger than her forty four years.

"Dr. West, thank you for coming out to Montana to meet with me," President-Elect Stonegate said with her brown eyes smiling, and she extended her hand to shake mine. "Have a seat," she said. Then, she added, "John, thank you for showing him here, I think we'll be fine."

"Yes, Ma'am," he quickly said and closed the door behind him as he left the room.

“I take it that John explained to you a bit about the position we’d like to offer you in the administration,” she said smiling.

“Yes, he did, but only a bit. I understand that I will be working one day a week as a special advisor to the President. He explained that I’ll be paid out of the National Institute of Mental Health’s budget,” I said, trying to sound authoritative.

“Yes, that’s all true,” she said, “but that’s just part of the story.” I looked at her. Her brown eyes dropped to the floor, and then regained mine. “I think you’ll play another role as well,” she said. I remained puzzled and simply sat there, waiting for the explanation.

“You see, I need someone to talk to, and I think I will need it all the more next month when I move to Washington and take the oath of office,” she said, and looked at me with those brown eyes open wide.

The President Elect looked down at the floor, and slowly added, “I think I’ve needed to talk with someone for some time, but never took the time. Now, I know I’ll have less time, but probably will have more need to talk to someone.”

“Do you mean you want me to be your therapist?” I asked with some astonishment.

“Well, officially, you’ll be a ‘Special Advisor to the President for Health Concerns’. But, yes, I’m asking you to serve as my psychiatrist,” she said with some hesitance.

“Madam President, it would be an honor to serve you in that role,” I stammered, “but why me?”

“When I saw you on TV after the terrorist attack that murdered your wife, I was struck, as was most of America by your statement that you forgave them,” Stonegate said thoughtfully. “I thought that was astonishing, and wise, showing some true strength. When I met with you, I could sense not only your pain, but I felt a connection with you as well. I thought that I could learn some of the things that you have learned, and that you could help me. Sturgis likes you as well, and he’s a very good judge of people,” the President-Elect said.

“Madam President, again, I’d be honored to serve in that role, but you should know some things about my background. I’m not a psychoanalyst, and psychotherapy has been only part of my work. I’ve been an administrator for a good part of the last few years,” I explained.

She quickly said, "I know all of that. I don't want an analyst. I want a practical psychiatrist. And, I must say the fact that you have been an administrator, and also that you ran for congress in the past is part of the reason for my decision". "So do you accept the job," Stonegate said smiling.

"Of course, I'd be honored," I said.

"Ok, a few things. First, enough of that honored crap. I need a doctor, not a lap dog. Second, you cannot ...ever... explain your real job in the administration. There will be many people asking you what you are doing. You will stick to the script of being a Special Advisor on Health. If I ever find out that you have divulged why you are talking with me, let alone any of the content from our sessions, I will have your medical license, and I will make sure you don't get another job in this country. Is that understood?" she said with her eyes blazing. That was the look I was used to from seeing her fiery speeches on television.

"Yes, Ma'am. That is totally understood. You should know that confidentiality is at the hallmark of every psychiatric encounter."

I tried to regain some of my standing with her, and added, "I can't tell anyone anything about any of my patients. And, I had a number of high profile patients in the past."

"Oh yeah, who?" Stonegate quickly and loudly challenged me.

"Well, I can't tell you," I responded just as quickly.

"Good," she said and softened and smiled.

"OK then. We'll meet in the beginning of January here in Helena, and then after the Inauguration, you will come to Washington weekly. You and Sturgis will pick a day. You need to know that I will try to meet with you briefly at least on that day, but I, of course, cannot guarantee it. There will likely be many days when you will come to Washington, and simply catch up on your paperwork. Agreed?" she asked.

"Agreed," I said in the same tone. "Good. Sturgis will contact you about a date in January. In the mean time, you can simply tell your folks at Philadelphia State that you'll be going to Washington to work on a grant one day a week," the President-Elect said. She got up from her chair, shook my hand, and ushered me out the door. "Thank you again for coming, Dr. West," she said a bit more softly.

Leaving her office, I wandered about the halls of the state capitol looking for the elevator down the ground floor. I found the rotunda, and looked for the exit. I was going to be the President's psychiatrist I thought to myself with growing astonishment. I turned around, and found Jeannette Rankins's statue and rubbed her left foot a little bit harder.

Chapter 28

That December was an especially lonely time. Over the years, I forgot how much of the Christmas celebrations involved couples or activities from work. Since I had neither, it felt odd to watch the same movies, see the same celebrations, and hear the same music, and yet feel apart from it somehow. I hadn't even dreamed of Terese in several weeks. I met with Barbara for dinner a few times, and neighbors invited me to different Christmas parties, but I was most definitely alone now. Christmas came and went, and I made it a point to go to bed early on New Year's Eve, even though I was praying it would bring a better New Year for me.

On January 5th, I again flew to Helena which had already seen more snow than Philadelphia would see in three winters. I thought I was prepared for the winter cold, but the winds of Montana had other ideas when I left the airport. I stood alone. I was outside for fifteen minutes before a cab took me to my hotel, and thought I would freeze.

"You've got to be better prepared for this, West, I said to myself."

I made it to the hotel, and ate dinner in the restaurant in the hotel lobby.

In my room that night, I again thought I should prepare for my first therapy session with the new president. But, I thought that I had hundreds and hundreds of first sessions with patients over the years, and I tossed the pad away, and opted instead for a basketball game on TV before going to bed in the hotel room.

The next day, I made it to the state capitol in plenty of time. The driveway from North Montana Street approaching the state capitol now was piled with snow on both sides of the street, covering the shrubs and much of the sidewalk. More snow was predicted for that night, and I doubted that I would be able to make my flight back to Philadelphia. Flying into the Helena airport was always an experience, but doing it in a snowstorm was not wise.

Entering the Montana State Capitol rotunda, I again admired the art, and feeling a little more at home, I again walked over to the statue of Jeanette Rankin, and rubbed her left foot for good luck. "Don't let me down, Jeanette," I said out loud as I passed. I made my way up to the Governor's office a full fifteen minutes ahead of time, and continued to be amazed at the chaos.

Phones were ringing. Folding tables were set up in the antechamber and down the halls. People were rushing back and forth, as I stood perfectly still watching the scene.

Earnest young men and women were poring over papers, many of whom, I'm sure were from job applicants like myself. Stonegate attracted a legion of young, energetic, and clean cut volunteers, and they were all there, wearing hooded sweatshirts from some of the best colleges in the nation.

The top of the hour came and went. Fifteen minutes passed. I thought to myself, "The Oracle would be having a stroke with this time management," and I smiled to no one in particular.

John Sturgis finally found me, and said, "Did you have a good flight out, Dr. West?"

I replied, "Yes, but I'm not sure about the one back."

He chuckled and said, "You'll have a good flight. We just don't know when it will be," and he allowed himself a smile. He took me to another office down the hall, and said, "The President-Elect will be here in a few minutes."

I took off my coat, and sat down in one of the leather chairs. I remember thinking to myself that this must be a state legislative committee office of some kind, and watched out the window as the first snowflakes started to fall beginning this storm. The foothills of the Rockies were clearly visible, and they boasted a thick coating of snow.

I thought they looked both rougher and more beautiful under their thick coating of the accumulated snow than bare and uncovered.

Amanda Stonegate entered, escorted by Sturgis. Sturgis quickly shut the door, and The President-Elect smiled and shook my hand.

She was lovely. Her hair was pulled behind, and a wisp of hair came down across her forehead. She had a pencil coming out from behind one ear like a nineteenth century accountant. The sweater she wore revealed why she was a beauty queen as well. I willed myself back to attention. “Looks like we’re in for some weather,” she said.

“Yes,” I said, “In Philadelphia, we don’t get this kind of winter.”

“Well, thank you for coming out to talk,” she said, and looked at me somewhat quizzically, and then looked down at the floor.

“How much time do we have?” I asked.

“Thirty minutes is in the schedule,” the President-Elect said.

“Good,” I said, though I would have preferred much more.

“So, I thought I should ask you what you hope to get out of our meetings,” I finally asked.

“That’s a good question,” Stonegate said. “Communication is at the heart of all interactions, and being more effective at that is key to my Presidency,” she said rather formally.

“Really,” I replied. “What’s the real reason?”

She laughed out loud. “You know, running for office, you’d be surprised how uncommon it is to get a real question. Usually, you can bring a few sound bytes out of the bag, and throw them around. I’ve been in politics a long time,” she said.

I smiled, but remained silent. “Well, I really do think that communication is key, and I do want to be better at it,” Amanda Stonegate said, “But, I’d have to say I think it would be good to have someone to talk to who is not a politician,” she looked at me. “Or at least, not a good one,” she said.

“Point taken,” I smiled back at her.

“What I do know is that when I get to Washington, there will be a lot of people who will want to swallow me alive, and more who will want to take advantage of me,” she said. “I think it would be useful to sort some things out.”

“Have you ever seen a psychiatrist, or been in therapy before?” I asked.

“No, and I don’t know quite what to expect,” Stonegate said.

“Another point taken,” I said. “The basic rules of therapy are that you should feel free to say what you think. You don’t need to worry about being polite, or being nice to me. I’m getting paid, and I work for you. I will not reveal what you say to anyone. And, also, as part of our agreement, I will not even let anyone know the purpose of our meetings. You, on the other hand should try to be as honest as you can, and don’t try to filter things that come to mind. It’s hard to talk about hard things, but those things especially will be key to express. So, those are the basic ground rules,” I said.

“OK,” she said. She was silent for a minute and shifted in her chair.

She moved the wisp of hair behind one ear, and finally said, “Do you have any idea what it is like being a woman in politics?”

“No, I have no idea,” I replied. “What is it like?” I asked, and I got out a notepad, and a pen.

“What are you doing?” she said as her eyes flared, and she leaned towards me.

“Taking notes,” I said, and I raised both hands with the pen in one hand as if I was being frisked.

“You will not do that, or I’m walking out right now. There will be no notes, no recording, just you and me,” she said angrily.

“But, notes are a usual part of the process. They help me remember, and help me to process what you say,” I tried to counter.

“Look, if you can’t remember what the President of the United States tells you about her life, you’ve got more problems than I do,” she said, with those brown eyes still on fire.

I gave in. “OK, no notes, no pen, just my memory,” I said. She looked down.

A full minute passed. “I’m sorry,” Stonegate said, “but, as I told you, I could use someone to talk to. No notes, and no pen allowed, though.”

“Fair enough,” I said evenly.

“So, what is it like being a woman in politics,” I asked again, somewhat chastened this time.

Stonegate looked up and over my right shoulder. “It’s funny. Locally, and in statewide races it’s an odd combination of people not expecting anything from you, being surprised when you advocate for something, yet also being surprised when you talk about anything other than mothers or education.”

“Nationally, you just try to grab attention for a moment, and in that moment, try to get a point across,” she said still looking out. Her lips pursed. “But in those meetings with the money people, they expect they can dictate to you what they want. They think that you will just lie down and give them what they want. One even called me ‘Honey’ a year ago,” Stonegate said.

I made a mental note of the “lie down and give them what they want” line.

“I can’t imagine anybody calling you ‘Honey’ now,” I said, somewhat sheepishly.

“No, nobody calls me Honey now,” she said, looking down.

I thought I should change the subject. “I saw in the rotunda that Montana is famous for firsts for woman politicians-the first woman in congress, and the first woman president,” I said.

“My God, do you know anything about her, about that Rankin woman?” she asked looking at me.

“Well, the brochure says that Jeanette Rankin was the first woman elected to congress. And, she was a republican from Montana,” I said, again wishing I was better prepared.

“We couldn’t be more different, she said. She was from a rich family, and in her thirties was elected to congress. She became involved in social issues after visiting her brother at Harvard and seeing what things were like in the Boston slums. Four days after she was elected to congress, she voted against the declaration of war for World War I. She was then voted out of congress. But twenty years later, as a devote pacifist, she became active in the America First party, and was re-elected to congress in 1940.

After the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, she was the only congressman—man or woman--to vote against the declaration of war against Japan. The vote in the House of Representatives was 388 to 1.

She said, 'As a woman I can't go to war, and I refuse to send anyone else.' She set the cause of women in politics back twenty years. She was voted out of congress –again– after one term. But, she didn't disappear, and continued to work in local politics, and was a peacenik speaker here and there in the country.

Then, when Vietnam rolled around she was a peacenik again and kept up protesting against that war until she died a month short of her 93rd birthday," Stonegate said shaking her head. "Women have to be strong, especially in politics," she said with conviction.

I thought being the only vote out of 389 on an issue showed some fortitude, but I didn't say anything.

Amanda Stonegate looked out the window. "Look, our time is up," she said. "But, it's snowing so hard that people will find it hard to get into town. I should have time to meet again tomorrow."

"Good," I said, "I would like to know you better."

"Fine," she said, "let's talk over lunch. I'll see you at 12 noon."

I watched her get up, and watched that sweater move toward the door.

"I'll see you tomorrow, Madame President," I said.

Gradually, I made my way down to the Rotunda, and looked up at Jeanette Rankin. “This is going to be more complicated than I thought,” I told her. She stood there, looking benignly down from her pedestal. I turned around and while no one was looking while I rubbed her left foot.

Chapter 29

Back at my hotel room, I watched the storm build outside the window. I couldn't get out of here now even if I wanted, I thought as snow quickly covered everything around me. I looked over to my notepad, and threw it away. “I won't need you here,” I said as I watched it twirl toward the trash can. I wandered over to the TV, and turned on the news.

The anchor had more of the news from Syria. “In the city of Hama,” the anchor intoned with a serious look on his face, “more riots emerged in the city center. Some protestors held signs demanding ‘punishment for America’ and in other places an effigy of Uncle Sam was burned. Here is our reporter in Amman, Jordan.”

The picture then showed a man standing with a desert background saying, “Anger continues to build in Syria. Some are demanding more from President Hameen, demanding that he take a stronger stand against both the United States and Israel. They continue to be angry at what they feel are aggressive moves by the Israelis who are now having military exercises close to their border, and they believe Americans are connected to these moves.” Scenes of the chaos on the streets were displayed behind the reporter who continued.

“I was able to go across the border yesterday into Syria, but it is not safe to stay there for long periods. Here is what the people told me,” he added.

The TV then switched to a scene with the reporter talking with a young man with a red head scarf standing in a street. “That cowboy Stonegate will made things even worse,” the young man said.

“America has a long history of imperialism, and they just want our money,” another said.

The reporter emerged from the interviews to be shown back on the TV screen. “While the charges against America seem quite vague, they are just as deeply felt in this part of the world where the rates of poverty are too high, and the fear of Israeli and American power run just as high,” he said. The anchor then switched to pictures of President Hameen in front of another screaming crowd.

I could only shake my head. Fear and anger are a bad combination. I removed my wallet and looked again at my picture of Terese which I carried always. I put it in on the bedside, and then switched the TV channel to ESPN. The battles of college basketball were much more fun to watch, and always had a solution at the end.

Hours later, I awoke with the TV still playing. That game was over, and I walked to the window.

The snow was still pouring out of the skies, and Helena was covered in white. I checked the clock, and it read 7:30 a.m. Collecting my picture of Terese, I went for breakfast.

Fortunately, a few hours later after going through my email on my computer in my hotel room, I was able to fetch a cab outside without trouble. “To the state capitol,” I said to the driver.

“That’s where everybody’s going these days,” he said.

I smiled. “What do you think of Stonegate?” I asked him.

“She’s one tough cookie, but she’s done us proud,” he said. “And, she’s pretty hot for a governor,” he smiled back. The roads were snow covered, but the cabbie had a good idea how to manage the snow, and the lack of traffic allowed us to arrive in no time.

Entering the Rotunda of the state capitol again, I stomped my feet, trying to rid myself of the snow caked on my shoes. The slush I accumulated though was hard to knock off so easily. My coat was a bit wet, and I removed it as I walked through the capitol rotunda. I walked toward the Governor’s office, and again looked up at the statue of Jeanette Rankin.

“What were you really like?” I wondered out loud, to the statue of that other Montana woman, knowing that the image on the pedestal answered few questions. She continued to look benignly down in her long dress looking over the activities of the state capitol. I rubbed her left foot, and said, “Well, wish me luck.”

After leaving the elevator, I turned toward the Governor’s office. But, when I turned the corner, there stood Frank Asbury, leaning against the wall. “Here for more meetings Dr. West?” he said with a scowl on his face.

“Yes, health care is important,” I said clearing my throat.

“Yup, it sure is,” he said matter-of-factly. “How are things back at Philadelphia State?” he asked with a smile on his face.

“Not so good,” I said, and then looked at him and said, “Thanks for asking.” I reached out to shake his hand and said, “Have a good day,” and walked purposefully away.

“Now, was that an accident?” I wondered.

Again, the complex of the office was a beehive of activity from young people busily shuffling papers, managing phone calls and running to the next table. I was twenty minutes early and leaned my back against the wall. Definitely, I was not part of this melee.

Only a few minutes later, John Sturgis again emerged from the melee to get me. “Come on,” he said. “The boss is ahead of schedule. Nobody can get here because of the snow.”

We exited the room into the hallway, and Asbury was still standing there. Sturgis gave him a “Hi, Frank,” as we passed.

Walking down the hall to Stonegate’s office, Sturgis said, “We didn’t know what to get you for lunch, so we ordered in a salad. That’s what President Elect Stonegate always eats for lunch.”

“So, I guess I can’t go wrong with that,” I added with what seemed the obvious reply.

Amanda Stonegate was already starting to eat. She was wearing cowboy boots over her denim jeans, and a “University of Montana” sweatshirt covered most of the rest of her. “I already started to eat. Have a seat,” she said. Sturgis left the room, without being asked this time, and with the door closed, Stonegate said, “Sorry about the angry outburst yesterday. I can’t be too careful about things.”

“No need at all to even comment on that,” I said. “Remember the rules. You can and should say what you are thinking. You don’t need to worry about what is proper. I’ll be there and I’ll be there the next time.”

I paused, but felt the need to repeat. I added, “And, everything is totally confidential. Look, no pen,” I said, raising both hands in surrender.

She smiled, and with a mouthful of salad, said, “Thanks.”

She looked wistfully out the window. “I love it when it snows,” she said. “It seems to cover everything up, and everything looks so clean.”

“I guess you’re more used to snow than I am,” I added.

“Yes, I’ve been around it all my life,” she added with a polite smile.

“I’d like to know more about your life,” I said.

“OK, what do you want to know?” she asked, sitting back in her chair.

“Well, tell me about your family,” was my opening gambit.

“There’s not much to tell,” Amanda Stonegate began. “My father was a ranch hand who worked at various ranches outside of Havre. He was a big guy, and could always find some job or another. My mother was rather—“ and then she paused for a time, and said, “simple.”

I raised my eyebrows, and she looked out the windows again, and continued.

“Mom grew up half way between Havre and Cut Bank, Montana on a ranch, and always referred to Havre as the “city”. She would say, “I’m going into the city to go shopping,” or “I wonder what’s playing at the movie house in the city.”

“They were only seventeen when they got married, and they made due. They never had much money, but we never were hungry,” she said.

“How did they get along?” I asked, somewhat more slowly.

“You know, I never really knew. My father would drink, and when he did that, my mother just left him alone, and went to the other side of the house. She would do the laundry, or jar vegetables or some other project then. She never spoke up to him. She just assumed he ran the house. He assumed that too. “

“Are they still living,” I asked.

“My father died about ten years ago in a ranch accident,” Stonegate said, looking straight ahead. She rather calmly and distantly related the story. “It was a Saturday morning, and I don’t know what kind of shape he was in, but a horse reared up and kicked him in the gut. He walked away at first, and then collapsed about an hour later.”

She continued, in a tone that was rather flat, as if she were discussing the news. “The other ranch hands took him to the hospital, but the doctors there said he had too much internal bleeding, and they weren’t able to stop it. I was in Helena at the time, at the state legislature, and when I went home for the funeral, my mother seemed more quiet than usual. That was her reaction to things. My mother, on the other hand, died about four years ago, in her sixties of a heart attack. Too much steak and bacon, I suppose,” Amanda Stonegate said and then gave me one of her smiles.

I looked at her longer than I should have, and then looked down.

“How about your brother and sister,” I asked. I knew from the press releases and from the campaign news fodder that she was the middle child, with an older brother and a younger sister. In psychiatry, the rule is that middle children are supposed to be peacemakers between the older children who rule the roost and the youngest ones who are spoiled. I wasn’t yet sure who Amanda Stonegate was, but she was not a peacemaker.

“My older brother has done well. He has a ranch outside of Cut Bank, and we see him fairly often. He has a happy wife, and two boys who live for football,” she said with a proud look on her face.

“Sounds like an all American family,” I said.

“Yup,” she replied, taking another big bite of salad.

“And, how’s your sister?” I asked. Mary Stonegate was several years younger, and I knew from the newspaper reports that she had some trouble with drinking as well.

“You mean about her drinking?” she asked with a suspicious look.

“Well, OK,” I said, but I was wondering in general.

“The drinking was never that big of a problem,” Stonegate told me looking me squarely in the eye with those brown eyes flashing a bit. “She’s been sober for four years now. She lives here in Helena, and I see her a lot. She has the most adorable three kids. Look I have a picture here.”

She walked over to her desk, and showed me a picture of three children posed against a back drop of trees in a park. “They’re bigger than that now. Susie, the oldest is now fourteen, and Joan, in the middle is eleven, and Ryan, the little boy, is only six. I watched them grow up with her, and they’re special to me,” she said proudly holding the picture up showing them off.

“And where is her husband?” I asked.

“He’s a reasonable guy, but he’s in Denver, and they get to see their father about once a month. They’re divorced, but her drinking had a lot to do with that.”

The President Elect forced a smile, looked at me, and added, “And they get along pretty well now,” she said.

“And, you never had any kids,” I added.

“No, I can’t have any,” Amanda Stonegate said. “Sometimes that happens.”

I smiled, and watched her for a moment. She walked over and put the picture back on her desk.

The President-Elect walked slowly back to her chair, sat down, and looked at me. I didn’t say anything. She looked at the floor for a moment, and then back at me. “So what do you think, Doc—crazy?” she said, and then moved her index finger in a circle around her ear giving the universal symbol for someone who clearly needed psychiatric help. She smiled at me with those big brown eyes.

I stared a little too long again, and said, “No, but I’d like to know more.”

“Well, know what?” she said, and seeming to feel more comfortable, she eased back into her chair.

“What were things like growing up?” I asked clinically, trying to make mental notes of all of this. It was hard not being able to take any written notes.

“I don’t know, what is it ever like growing up?” she said nonchalantly.

“I grew up on a ranch outside of Havre. Both of my parents were there, along with my brother and sister. We weren’t rich, but we never really wanted for any of the necessities.” She shrugged her shoulders.

“How about school?” I asked.

“Well, that part was good. I did well in school. I remember when I went to high school in Havre, it seemed to open up the world. I was excited about learning everything—especially history. I did well, and had no trouble getting into college. I was the first one in my family to go to college. My mother couldn’t understand the point of a farm girl going to college, and I’m not sure she really ever understood that. I went to law school, and then I was elected president,” she said, and sat up straighter.

I smiled, and said, “That is quite a story, you know.” I paused for a minute, and she waited for me, in an almost regal fashion.

“So what’s the story about becoming Miss Montana?” I couldn’t hold that question back.

Stonegate laughed out loud. “That question never leaves me, and I guess it never will even though I’ll be the first woman president,” she said.

I tried to hide my face, but I know I blushed.

“It’s not much of a story. I was nearing the end of my first year in college at the University of Montana. Even though it was a state school, paying for tuition was by no means certain for me. I read a short piece in the paper that the pageant was going to be held the next week in Bozman, and the winner would win a scholarship. It seemed all I needed to do was to fill out an application form, and bring a formal dress and a bathing suit. I filled out the application form, got my prom dress out of the closet, and borrowed a swimming suit from my best friend, Sally. The two of us drove down to Bozman for the day. Sally’s mother worked as a hairdresser, and she cut my hair before we went, and when we got there, my friend put makeup on me. At that point in my life, I had no idea what to do with that stuff. So, when I showed up, there must have been sixty girls there, all strutting around. Most had their mother and an entourage with them. For me, it was just me and Sally, my friend, trying to find our way. I told my mother only that I was staying the weekend with Sally, but I never told her where I was going.”

She looked away, and then continued. “A lot of the girls there were very pretty, but they didn’t have much upstairs, or at least they didn’t think they should admit to having too much upstairs,” she said with a smile.

She looked out the window at the snow, and then looked back at me. “It wasn’t until I got there, that I found out that I had to have a ‘talent’. I had no idea what that was. I found out that the other girls were playing the piano or singing. One even was a juggler,” she said with a laugh. The President-Elect and former beauty queen continued her story, “Sally and I just looked at each other, totally shocked. I said to her, ‘What can I do?’ Sally looked around at everybody warming up, and she said, ‘Well, we ain’t driving all the way back home.’ Then she smiled, and said, ‘Well, you were always quick on your feet in Mr. Haney’s current events class, why don’t you ask the audience for questions.’ I thought that was the craziest thing I ever heard. But, I had no better idea, and the pageant started in only an hour. So, when the pageant organizers asked me what my talent was, I just said ‘turn up the lights in the auditorium and you’ll find out.’” Amanda Stonegate looked at me, and laughed out loud.

I couldn’t help but be enthralled. I had never heard this story, and never read it in any of the bio’s on her website, or in any of the magazine accounts. She moved her hair away from her face, and looked up, and with the light catching her face, I could imagine the nineteen year old Amanda Stonegate on that stage in Bozeman, Montana

about to become the next Miss Montana.

“So, what happened next,” I asked, not for any psychiatric reason, just because I wanted to hear the rest of the story.

“Well, I got into my prom dress, and Sally put makeup on me. I went to the rear of the stage, and heard the directions they gave to all the girls. We would all walk out one at a time and smile. I had no idea what to do, and I got in the back of the line, and imitated the girls in front of me. That apparently was the ‘evening gown’ competition. Have you ever heard of such a thing?” she asked. “And then, the talent competition started. Running all sixty girls through show tunes must have been punishing for the judges. Then, the announcer said ‘and now, Amanda Stonegate from Havre, Montana’, and they turned up the lights like I asked. I walked out onto the stage and said, and I swear to God this is true, ‘I’m Amanda Stonegate, and I’m running for President of the United States, and I’m here to answer your questions.’” My mouth dropped open.

“Well, the audience laughed, and I guess they thought I was going to be a comedian, and it occurred to me that if nobody asked anything, I was sunk.”

She flashed one of those patented Stonegate smiles, and continued, “Thankfully, Sally was in the middle of the auditorium, and put up her hand and said, ‘How are you going to handle the civil rights problem?’

“I gave an answer to that one, and the laughter stopped. Then, one of the judges put up a hand and asked a question about the tax breaks for farmers, and I gave an answer to that one, and several other people asked questions. Because of the number of girls, we were supposed to be on stage for only three minutes, but they let me go on for ten to fifteen minutes. Finally, a judge said, ‘Thank you Miss Stonegate’ into the microphone, and I walked off stage. I had no idea whether that was good or bad, but I knew it was over. I quickly went backstage, and got into the swimming suit I borrowed from Sally, and combed my hair. We all were paraded one by one back on stage in our swimming suits and high heel shoes--another bizarre combination, and when they announced, ‘Amanda Stonegate’ from Havre, Montana, I walked out on to the stage, and I swear to God somebody from the audience yelled out, ‘You got my vote’ and the audience laughed and applauded. I walked to the center of the stage, smiled, and then walked off. I couldn’t tell if they were laughing at me or not,” she said with a chuckle.

“The pageant went on with all the girls parading around, and then anxiety reigned as the judges decided who would win,” The President-Elect said looking into the past. “They summoned us back on stage, and named the third place girl, and then the runner up,” she added with a smile.

“Then, when they announced my name as the winner of the pageant, the crowd cheered, but all of the mothers sent mental daggers in my direction. I won the \$2,500 scholarship, enough to pay for tuition for a year and a half at the University of Montana at that time, and a trip to Atlantic City for the Miss America pageant. That was my first plane trip, to fly out to New Jersey for that event,” she said.

“So, what happened there?” I couldn’t help asking.

“Well, I didn’t win Miss Congeniality,” she said.

I smiled, and she laughed again.

“There, the mothers were totally out of control, hovering with all kinds of straps for those poor girl’s bodies. I told them what my talent was, and they looked at me strangely, and asked me again what my talent was. The pageant officials just shook their heads.

The talent competition this time was in a small room, with only the judges being present.”

President Elect Stonegate added with a scowl, “They would have no part of somebody not playing along with what girls were supposed to be talented at, and I got a very poor grade on the ‘talent competition’. But, I did get to prance on national TV with Sally’s bathing suit on,” she laughed again.

The President Elect leaned back in her chair, and shook her head. “I was amazed at the east coast. I was surprised how crowded everything was, and how everybody was running around so quickly. But, I was homesick for the hills of Montana and I was eager to get back home. I was a minor celebrity in town for a while, and I made some extra money opening up supermarkets, and working Saturdays at used car lots. That got me money for the last year of school.”

“So what happened then?” I asked in a more clinical form.

“I had a great time in college,” she said. “At the University of Montana?” I asked, pointing at her sweatshirt. She looked down, and said, “Go Griz” and pumped her fist in the air. “Griz,” I found out later is short for the grizzly bears, the school’s mascot.

“I know, and I have had this emphasized to me time and again, that some people, especially some people in Washington think you have to have an ivy league degree to tie your shoes,” President Elect Stonegate said. “You don’t have to explain that to me,” I said, thinking of my colleagues across Philadelphia behind the ivy encrusted halls.

She nodded. “In a small town, or in a smaller college there are kids who work hard, and there are kids who could care less and just want to drink. Likewise there are teachers who care about teaching, and teachers who don’t,” She said with some emphasis. “At Missoula, at the U of M, a lot of worlds opened up for me. It was like high school, only more so. It continued to open the world for me, and I worked hard at all the course work, and I did well academically.”

“I guess you did work hard,” I said, “but were there any boyfriends?” She looked down, and seemed to get a little more uncomfortable.

“In high school, it was a small town, and everybody knew everybody else’s family,” Stonegate observed. “Sally and I hung around a lot, and there were always groups of boys and girls, and we just had fun. There wasn’t anybody I was serious about.” She shrugged her shoulders.

After a time, she finally continued, but any trace of a smile was gone from her face. “In college, especially after I was Miss Montana, things were different. To most of the guys, I was either a curiosity, or somebody they wanted to conquer, to put the ‘Miss Montana’ notch on their bed post. When I started going out with guys carrying mace in my pocketbook, I thought to myself, ‘time to put this on hold for a while’. So, for a good two years, whenever anybody asked me out, I just said no. I was so tired of all of that; just wrestling guys, and smacking them back all the time,” Amanda Stonegate said.

She crossed her legs tightly, and folded her arms across her chest and looked down. “It just wasn’t fun, do you know what I mean?” she said with a pained expression on her face.

“I suppose,” I said, non-committedly, and looked forward trying to show no expression.

I thought back to the content of my lecture on psychotherapy to the beginning residents. You see, in therapy, you are taught not to respond with emotions of your own to allow the patient to fill up the space and the room with her own thoughts and emotions. I knew I wasn’t getting the entire story, but that would have to come later, I knew.

“So then, there was law school?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, unfolding her arms. “Law school was tough, but it was tough for all of us, and a number of us worked together in a group. That was tough, but it was academically challenging. I treated law school like it was some kind of a personal dare. Most of the class was men, and I wanted to see how well I would do. It turned out I did fine,” she said looking down.

I kept silent, trying to be still. She looked out the window, and it looked like the snow stopped.

After a minute, she said, “I began dating again. In fact for the last year of law school, I was pretty serious, seeing one of the professors. He was a few years older than I, and he seemed worldly to me. I respected his intellect, and he was great looking. I knew that was supposed to be bad, dating a teacher, and we kept it quiet. He told me I couldn’t tell anyone we were seeing each other because he could lose his job if anyone found out.

Close to graduation, I found out the reason I was supposed to keep it quiet was because he was also screwing two of my classmates. They were both going to Helena to work, one interning with the state supreme court, and one working with a state legislative committee.” She stopped, and shook her head from one side to the other.

Amanda looked somewhere over my shoulder, and continued, “I did well, and had my choice of jobs in the state capitol, but I couldn’t bring myself to go to Helena to work, especially next to them. So, at the last minute, with my top job choices gone, I didn’t know what to do. So, I went back home and set up my own practice in Havre,” she added sadly.

“My first office in Havre was in an old storefront downtown,” she said.

“Was it really next to the Dairy Queen, like the newspapers said?” I asked.

“That was the only good thing about it,” Stonegate added deeply exhaling. “The office had little heat, was cold in the winter, and had mice year round. But, it was where I got started. Havre wasn’t overpopulated with lawyers, but it wasn’t overpopulated with business either. I did a few wills, and a few real estate settlements, but it wasn’t very exciting.”

“One day, Jim Doyle rolled into my office with a contract he wanted me to review,” she added with a smile broadening across her face. “He was thinking about selling off some of the family’s cattle. He was a big guy, great looking, and I only knew him peripherally in high school.” She looked away as if the high school yearbook was there.

Continuing, she added, “He was a football player, two years ahead of me, and you know, was one of those guys who dated all the cheerleaders. But when he came to me in my law office, he seemed different—a little older, and seemed a bit better looking. He asked me out then and there. I wondered then if it was really the contract or me he wanted to see. But, if anything his physique had matured since high school. I was bored, and feeling down and I went out with him. I remember distinctly putting the can of mace in my pocketbook before leaving my apartment that evening, but I didn’t need it,” Stonegate explained.

“He actually was kind of quiet, and didn’t even try to kiss me on that first date,” Amanda Stonegate reflected. “It was refreshing. Later, he told me that he was intimidated by me. He never dated somebody who went to college, let alone law school, and didn’t know what to do, the poor guy. We went out a few more times, and it was nice to have another friend in town,” she said with a smile.

“Did he really take you to the rodeo in Cody, Wyoming and then ride the bronco for ten seconds, like in the stories they print about you?” I asked again, somewhat embarrassed to be sounding like a fan magazine.

“Well, he really did take me to the rodeo, and I had no idea that he was going to ride,” she said

She quickly added, “He did win the bronco bull contest, but he got thrown at the end of it, and landed in the hospital. I rushed down to the gate, and followed him to the hospital. They kept him overnight, but I was surprised by my feelings when I looked down at Jim sprawled on the ground of the rodeo arena, with the rodeo clown running around trying to shoo the bull away. I felt bad for him, of course, but I also felt close to him, and knew that I had to go to the hospital with him to be by his side. That was twenty years ago,” she said, slowly turning her gaze to the mountains out the window.

“How have the twenty years been?” I asked after a moment.

“He’s been a wonderful husband,” she said quickly. She looked at me with her eyes narrowed a bit and then looked out the window again.

I waited for her to say something, but she didn’t. She continued to look out the window, and then looked at me. It felt like she was ready to shoot darts with those eyes.

“What’s the rest of the story with the twenty years?” I asked softly.

She exhaled again, and turned to me. “Well, it’s complicated,” she said taking a pause.

“He is a good guy, and he has always been supportive of me. He always wanted to stay in Havre, and work on the ranch, and he’s good at that. I could never have kids, and that was so hard for him. I always had new battles to fight. When I was in the state legislature and even more so now that I’m governor, we were separated a lot. Over the last year, running for president, we didn’t see much of each other,” she said.

She paused, and then looked at me. “I suppose you could say that we respect each other.”

I raised my eyebrows, but didn’t want to pursue that comment further this early in the therapy. I looked at my watch, and realized I only had five more minutes with her.

“And then in Havre, the Axis Oil case came,” I said.

She cleared her throat. “Yes,” she said. “I wasn’t that busy with my law office then. One day, some guys I went to high school with brought their fathers to my law office in town. I knew they lived on the reservation, and the Indians who didn’t play football were always kind of clannish in school. But, they were always nice to me, but we just weren’t close.

When the crowd of about ten of them came in the office, I didn’t know what to expect.” She paused for a moment, collecting her thoughts in her mind.

“They explained the Axis Oil deal, and it just smelled to me. I took it on, and fought it tooth and nail. The tribes on the Rez were very supportive for me throughout the entire legal case– Sturgis’s father was one of the people I worked with on the legal fight. But, boy, was it tough taking on a multinational oil company. I was working at least 80 hours a week. But, the deal smelled so bad, I won. They appealed it, of course, and I worked even harder. By then, I had some volunteer law students from the University of Montana Law School interning with me, and we fought them back, and won again. The judgment decreed they had to pay all my legal fees, and so I had about three years of salary money coming to me. I paid the Indians who helped me with the case, and I still had a nest egg. Jim and I were married, and we bought a small place outside of town. He continued to work on the ranch, and I continued to work in my small practice.”

“The opportunity came along to run for the state legislature, which was only a part time job, and I won,” she smiled. “I continued to work at my law practice in Havre, but politics consumed more and more of my time.”

“And you won a few more elections since then, Madame President,” I said.

“Yup,” she said, and clicked her cowboy boots on the floor. She looked at her watch, “Wow, an hour has gone by. I’m exhausted. I feel like I just made an overnight campaign stop in California,” and she flashed those big, brown eyes at me and smiled.

“Well, doc, you’ve asked me a lot of things. Can I ask you something?” Amanda Stonegate said leaning forward.

“I guess so,” I replied.

She looked over my head, and then zeroed in on me. “Did you really forgive those terrorists who murdered your wife?” she asked.

“I’m getting there,” I said, and I felt my eyes beginning to tear up. “I’m doing a whole lot better and I think I’m most of the way along to forgiving them,” I said, wiping my eyes.

“You’re going to have to teach me how to do that,” she said solidly.

“I’d be happy to talk with you about that,” I said, trying to regain some professional footing.

“I did appreciate your visit to me in Philadelphia, and I wanted to tell you that,” I said.

“Thanks,” the President Elect said, “and I appreciate you coming out here to Big Sky Country to talk with me,” she said, sounding more like a politician than a patient.

“The next weeks will be busy, and then there will be the inauguration. I would like to continue to meet, and we’ll have to figure out the best time...The middle of the week is probably the best time to squeeze out some time. Why don’t we plan to meet over lunch on Wednesdays? Inauguration week will be too crazy, but let’s plan to meet next in the week after the Inauguration. John Sturgis can work out the details with you,” Amanda Stonegate said, arising from her chair. She was once again, fully in charge, walked to the door, and shook my hand, and said, “Thanks for coming out Dr. West” in a more formal tone than I heard over the last hour.

I smiled, and said, “OK, I’ll talk with Sturgis.”

The door closed behind me, and after going down the hallway, I turned at the next corridor. Frank Asbury was still there, leaning against the wall.

“Have a good meeting Doc?” he said with a measured tone.

I was shocked to see him. “Well, it could have been better. I have to try to talk the President into increasing medicare payments for psychiatric inpatient care. Health policy is so important, you know,” I said quickly.

“I suppose so,” Asbury said slowly, and watched me walk down the hall.

Entering the elevator, I half expected somebody to jump in behind me. But the door closed, and I walked into the rotunda of the state capitol. Jeanette Rankin remained there in her vigil over the state capitol. I walked over to her, and said, "I'll need your help, Jeanette," and rubbed her left foot. I thought it was beginning to shine a bit.

Chapter 30

The Helena airport was dry and planes had no trouble leaving the next day, and I returned there in plenty of time to catch the first of the series of flights leading me back to Philadelphia. The airport was small, and the one restaurant in the terminal had its TV tuned to the news channel. I ducked into the greasy spoon to get some breakfast. Waiting for my eggs, I could hear the news anchor give an update about the situation in Syria. “Riots and demonstrations continue throughout Syria, protesting what they call American ‘Imperialism’.” Some carried signs saying “Down with the cowgirl,” referring to President Elect Stonegate. “President Hameen continued his tough talk against both the United States and Israel, who he feels “would squash us like a bug if they could,” he says.

Senator Smithson, the Vice-President Elect yesterday on the floor of the senate referred to these statements stating simply, "Syria harbors terrorists." The TV showed Smithson on the floor of the Senate, but there were few people actually witnessing his comments on the Senate floor. The scribes were dutifully recording the session, but clearly Smithson was speaking to the TV cameras and the larger audience than attempting to influence any business in the Senate.

The Vice President Elect continued, "How long are we going to allow them to attack us, and then hide behind crowds on the street who threaten us as well. In the war on terror, there is no middle ground. Syrians and all peoples of the world have a clear choice to make. Either you support the murderers, or you support democracy."

The TV anchor reappeared on the screen, and said "Tension in America continues to heat up since the terrorist attacks before the election. Vice President Elect Smithson continues to be quite vocal in his attacks on Syria, and repeatedly said, "No state should support terrorism". President Elect Stonegate, who during the campaign repeatedly attacked the prior administration, continues her call for a strong national defense."

My eggs arrived, and the TV anchor then became enthralled with a story about a starlet who was seen drunk after a party last night. Grainy video, from someone's cell phone camera showed her stumbling down the street. The television news anchor was equally concerned with her sobriety as with the threats from Syria.

Thankfully, the winter storm that yesterday delayed me in Helena now swept through the Midwest, and lost steam as it entered the rest of the country.

I had no trouble arriving in Philadelphia that night.

Pulling into my driveway, I again saw the tree guarding the driveway that now was bare of leaves, after being attacked by storms over its life. It still stood guard over the driveway, and having survived much worse in its life, would still be there in the spring. The house was quiet, but warm.

Stonegate's last question on whether I really did forgive the terrorists hung with me. Thinking about it over the hours riding on the plane, I decided that I did forgive them. They were indeed murderers, and their use of murder as a weapon to advance some idea, or find an audience for their narcissistic ego was despicable. Those were the facts. But, in my life, I understood that they had taken the person who had meant most to me in my life. Knowing how much she meant to me also focused the good times we had, how she had supported me, and how we grew together over the years. I was grateful for those years. Yes, I did forgive them. I was ready to move on.

Hate and fear can grind one down quickly and I wanted to let that go. I walked out to the back garden as the day wound to a close and talked to Terese. I told her how much I appreciated her, and my regret for not telling her that more often while we were together. I asked her for her help as I moved on in my life.

The January wind was chilly in the back yard, and I pulled my coat tighter around me. I began to talk about Stonegate, and her incredible story of becoming president from a humble background, and her incredible resilience and creativity. I also told Terese about my run-in with Jeanette Rankin who fought a decades long fight for peace from World War I to World War II to Vietnam. I said out loud, "There must be something to those Montana women."

I smiled and looked down, "But none of them could hold a candle to you."

Chapter 31

My office at Philadelphia State also was quiet. I was busy filling out the paperwork for my “grant” to go to Washington one day a week. Largely, though, with the absence of the inpatient units, much of my work was now gone. We had a small outpatient clinic, which would stay for now, and the second quarter numbers from the accountants for Philadelphia State University School of Medicine and Hospital continued to look rather dire. We were continuing to lose money, and I knew that all aspects of the hospital and medical school would continue to be examined. I could hear the hoofbeats of the accountants coming to complain about cutting our outpatient clinics as well. Fortunately, most of the faculty saw the writing on the wall and were either leaving, planning to leave, or counting the days to retirement. I looked forward to taking on more of the medical student teaching, which would drift to me by default. The students brought energy and optimism, and I brought a little knowledge. It was more than a fair trade.

My plan for inauguration day was to sit here in my office, and watch the whole thing with my feet up. I heard the angry, combative candidate Stonegate on TV, and I met the complicated woman in Helena. I wondered what President Stonegate would look like on inauguration day.

I received a ticket to one of the many inaugural balls, but put it in my drawer at home. I had no one to bring to a ball, and I knew from talking with people who went to inaugural balls before to expect a total zoo. I had enough chaos for a while. The ticket would remain unused.

Barbara knocked on my door, taking a break from her new role as nursing director of the Pediatric Outpatient Clinic.

“How’s the world of the little people,” I asked.

“The little people are fun, but it turns out they don’t make much money for the hospital either,” she said.

“I saw the latest numbers for the second quarter, and it’s not too promising for dear Philadelphia State,” I added with a warning.

“Well, I’ll just have to hang on and see what happens,” she said.

We agreed to go to dinner sometime in the next week. “How are you doing?” she asked, leaning forward a bit.

“I’m OK,” I quickly said. She raised her eyebrows, and turned her head toward me. “I am OK,” I said a bit more forcefully. “I’m not great, but I’m OK.”

Barbara only stared at me sympathetically, and wasn’t quite sure what to say.

She simply added, “Hang in there, Andy, and you’ll get through this.” I agreed with her again.

When Barbara left, I went over to my TV in the office to make sure it was still working. Lots of other things in this building were falling apart, I thought.

The TV did indeed work, and the set was still tuned to the news channel. I stared at a story about saving money on heating bills by somehow attaching plastic wrap to your windows. I couldn’t imagine the insulation power of plastic wrap, but the anchor felt that it could save the planet. I was about to walk over and turn off the TV, when a familiar face grabbed my attention.

Frank Asbury appeared on screen. “Yes, Vice President Elect Smithson continues to work with President Elect Stonegate. We are monitoring the situation in Syria and the rest of the Middle East with great concern. We are in meetings with the current administration, and we appreciate the information they share with us.” The anchor cited Asbury as a longtime aide to Vice President Elect Smithson, and an “administration spokesman”.

“Keep an eye on them, Sturgis,” I said out loud to the TV.

Chapter 32

In the days leading to Amanda Stonegate's inauguration as the first woman president in the history of the republic, there were repeated stories about Stonegate's past including photos of her wearing the "Miss Montana" sash as well as pictures of her winning the Axis Oil law suit.

A few pictures showed her and Jim Doyle. None showed the rest of her family. Every one of the stories referred to her as a hard fighting, hard charging politician. She was that, of course. But, I knew there was more to the story, and I knew that even after meeting with her for several sessions that I didn't have the whole story.

The TV continued to feature good natured pieces on little girls who were also planning to be president, and a few on the Stonegate marriage. "Jim has a ranch to run in Montana as well," Amanda Stonegate told the camera, "and he'll be splitting his time between Havre and Washington."

"That sounds like a hard job," the reporter said.

Stonegate smiled, and replied, "It is a hard job, but Jim is up to it." She quickly turned to another reporter, and seemed to search for another question to answer. Questions about the budget, national defense, and finally questions about her plans for a gown to the inaugural ball emerged.

Sprinkled in the news that week were also stories about many “firsts” for women in America including Wyoming giving women the right to vote first, and the accomplishments of the women in the early part of the 20th century achieving the right to vote. There were stories about “Rosie the Riveter” featuring women who worked in factories during World War II, and also of the sexual revolution of the 1960’s and 1970’s. These were all interesting, but none seemed to focus on the real accomplishments of women leading social movements to eliminate the slums of the 19th century, lead the fight on prohibition, and establish nursing and much of health care. These or any of the other accomplishments of the “fairer sex” were largely ignored.

And, none really helped me get to know Amanda Stonegate. She was a woman, and she was president. I remembered Stonegate telling me, “You’d be surprised how uncommon it is to get a real question from the media.”

I looked forward to Inauguration day, and brought a Philadelphia hoagie with me to eat during the ceremonies. A hoagie is a Philadelphia sandwich which can be well over a foot long, onto which all kinds of meats, cheeses and sauces are crammed, somehow fitting together into a palatable whole.

I suppose we all are like that, with all kinds of things crammed into us. Watching Amanda Stonegate being sworn in as president with a hoagie crammed with all manner of things seemed to be the best way to spend the day.

Washington filled its historic streets with millions of people, and the parade route grounds also were packed with people celebrating, and some people protesting. There were stories on television about school girls wearing Stonegate buttons, hoping to get a glimpse of the new President, and even more stories about the tight security surrounding the events. The terrorism threats and fears hovered over this national event as well.

By the time I was ready to get out my hoagie for lunch, Amanda Stonegate appeared on the steps of the Capitol with her husband Jim by her side. Jim towered over her, and smiled. Amanda Stonegate took the oath of office to “preserve, protect and defend” the constitution and the country. The new commander in chief was well under six feet tall, but stood on the capitol steps with her auburn hair, and blazing brown eyes focused on the crowd. The beauty queen turned lawyer turned politician was about to be sworn in as President of the United States of America.

Her inaugural address was not long but was filled with thanks to those who had worked for her, and to the women in public service who paved her way to Washington. Stonegate added thanks to “those who made America the great nation it is”. Getting into the substance of the speech, she said, “There are those who doubt the determination of the average American to continue to build on the greatness of the past. There are those who doubt the resilience of Americans to break free of adversity, and lead the world into the next period of prosperity. For those who doubt us,” she said, and paused, and looked over the crowd, “know that for centuries, America was built by those who by sheer determination conquered a continent, defeated fascism, and led the world into the 21st century. We are those people. America will not stand by and be attacked by any group, any enemy, or any nation. We in America will respond to any threat, from within our shores or from abroad. We will continue to build America no matter the obstacle. America has not been given to us. America is a process. America is a never ending task, and we continue the challenge. We continue the fight.” Applause began throughout the crowd, and overwhelmed the stage. Stonegate stopped, and nodded at the crowd, looking first to her right and then to her left.

“Much has been said about me being the first woman president,” she said. “That is true, and while I am honored to follow the path of the suffragists who gave American women the right to vote, I also follow the path of Washington, Lincoln, Eisenhower, and Reagan who stood here as well.”

She smiled while applause once again flooded the stage. “I may be the first woman president. But, I am not the first determined President, I am not the first resolute President, and I am not the first President to share with you, the gallant people of the United States of America, the job of continuing the process of building this great country. Today, we stand together. We stand together to defend our shores from all those who would attack us or denigrate the great principles we have always cherished. For those who doubt our resolve, I stand here on the steps of the Capitol, looking out over the goodness in America’s people ready to defend our way of life, and to lay the foundation for the great enterprise that is America in the 21st century.”

She stopped and the applause of the crowd was deafening. She shook hands with Vice President Smithson, who was dressed in a tuxedo, and then gave Jim a hug, who underneath his suit was indeed wearing his cowboy boots on the stage perched on the U.S. Capitol steps.

Chapter 33

In the week after the inauguration, I prepared to travel to Washington to continue my job as the President's psychiatrist. The easiest way to get to downtown Washington from Philadelphia is by train, and as I bought my ticket and boarded the train by myself, all I could think of was Terese's last train trip. Ahead of me in the train car was a young woman wearing her winter coat, and I turned around, and selected a seat two train cars behind her. There did seem to be a bigger police presence in the station boarding the train, and the presence of bomb sniffing dogs was somewhat reassuring, but I only wished they had been at the station in the beginning of November.

Getting off the train, I took the Washington Metro to the White House. I was a bit amazed at the Metro. While Washington is famous for things running in circles, the Metro is clean, efficient, and a remarkably effective system for getting to place to place. If Congress had designed the Metro, it would feature trains going nowhere, with stations memorializing great moments in American History. But, the trains would never arrive. The Metro, though, delivers what it promises – to get you there in a straight line.

Walking up to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, The White House, is indeed humbling.

The U.S. Capitol is a short walk away, and the monuments seeking to serve inspiration to the masses do exactly that. I walked around the cement barriers now standing guard outside the President's residence, and pulled my coat closer to me trying to shield the winter wind. I gave my name and driver's license to the guard at the gate, and was ushered into the side entrance of The White House. Still in awe, and feeling more like a tourist than an employee, I was directed to a waiting area filled by men and women, all in blue suits with their computers and notes at the ready. Not allowed any notes, I brought a novel to read. I was too embarrassed to pull it out.

After a short while, John Sturgis appeared in the door, and said, "Dr. West", and motioned his finger for me to follow him. John was wearing a suit and tie, but of course, his top button of the shirt was not fastened. His hair looked like it had been combed sometime this week, but probably not today.

He said, "Good morning, Dr. West. Thanks for coming down to see us. The President is running behind schedule today, and has a variety of appointments after your visit today. So, she may need to cut your visit short."

I simply said, "Thanks for filling me in," but my mouth was clearly open in awe of The White House.

I marveled at the marble in the hallways, the red carpets here and there, and the crowded offices filled with busy workers, each seemingly running at top speed.

Sturgis turned right, and stopped at a small group of chairs. "This is the waiting area for the Oval Office," he said. "Have a seat, and we'll be with you soon."

I took a seat opposite a young man in a military uniform, with a brief case on his lap which strangely was handcuffed to him. He sat ramrod straight. The two of us were the only ones in the room, and after a few minutes, I said, "Come here often?" in a mild attempt at humor.

He just stared back at me, and said, "Good Morning, Sir."

After a few more minutes, I said, "Boy, it's windy outside today."

He simply replied, "Yes, Sir," and continued to sit and stare.

I gave up.

In about twenty minutes, John Sturgis again appeared at the hallway, and instructed me to follow him. We walked down the hall, and I said, pointing behind me, "Well, he's chatty."

Sturgis stared at me, looked down, and said, “He’s got the football, Sir.”

While I knew Sturgis played football in college, I didn’t know that metaphor. “What do you mean?” I finally asked as we approached the door to the secretary guarding the Oval Office.

Sturgis stared at me in disbelief. “It’s his shift to carry the launch codes,” he said.

I stared back still not comprehending.

“For the missiles, sir,” Sturgis added.

I looked down, trying not to show the red color sweeping over my face. Sturgis walked ahead and said to the secretaries, “This is Dr. West, the President’s 12 o’clock appointment.”

“Good Morning, Dr. West,” she said pleasantly. “Can I get you a cup of coffee?”

I said, “No, thank you,” mainly because I was afraid to spill anything in The Oval Office.

We entered The Oval Office, and John Sturgis showed me to a couch in the middle of the room, and said “the President will be here in a few minutes after her meeting,” and then he left.

While I knew that I should have been in awe of sitting at the seat of power of the greatest country in the world, my first thought to myself was, "I hope somebody cleaned these couches since Clinton was here."

I looked around. The office truly was oval, with the President's desk anchoring one end and windows and flags behind it. There were two couches facing each other, with ornate upholstered chairs situated at either end of the couches. On the floor was a rug which bore the seal of The President of the United States.

After a few minutes, I stood up, and walked toward Stonegate's desk. There was a Charles Russell sculpture of a cowboy on horseback on her desk, and on the table behind were family pictures of The President and Jim. In front of that picture, though were pictures of her nieces, Susie and Joan along with her small nephew Ryan being held by her sister Mary. A picture of her brother's family, with the whole brood smiling holding skis with a snow covered mountain in the background was also prominently featured. Walking around the room, I admired other Charles Russell paintings of western scenes which were featured on either side of the office.

I was standing in front of one of the paintings when Amanda Stonegate walked into her office. “Good Afternoon, Madam President,” I said politely.

“Hi, Dr. West,” she replied breezily. She came over the chair next to the couch, and motioned for me to sit down.

“Sorry I’m late,” The President of the United States said rather formally, “We’re running a bit behind today,” she said.

“Sure,” I said, and nodded, and waited for her to add something more substantive. She had taken off her blazer when she entered the office, and she was wearing a light blue sweater beneath. Her auburn hair was pulled behind her ears, and when she looked up at me, I could feel those brown eyes focus in on me.

“We’ve been busy here, and I only have a few minutes,” Stonegate said, looking at me.

“How has the first week been?” I asked.

“It’s been a whirlwind of parties, meetings, and a few confrontations,” she said.

“That’s a strange mixture,” I added.

“Yes, it seems that everyone is sizing up the new kid in town,” she said with those eyes open wide.

“Didn’t that happen in Helena, too?” I asked.

“Well, not to this extent,” Stonegate said looking across the room at one of the paintings. “I had been in the state legislature for a while, and the folks knew me. Here, people are holding on to their positions jealously, and seem to be daring me to do something,” she said.

“So, what do you do?” I asked. “I watch, and evaluate,” she said with a measured gaze.

I simply looked at her. Even in her business suit, I couldn’t help notice her shape, and those brown eyes were mesmerizing. She shifted her weight in her chair, and uncrossed her legs. “Jim is flying back to Montana tomorrow,” she said.

“Oh, why’s that?” I said with somewhat greater interest.

“Well, I’ve been very busy here, and he does have a ranch to run back there,” she said but her voice trailed off at the last part of the sentence.

“Will he be living back in Havre?” I asked. “He’ll be coming back and forth. Washington is a hard place to live, and he’ll be coming in periodically,” she said.

“How are things with the two of you?” I asked finally.

“The same,” Stonegate said breezily. I turned my head to one side, and looked at her.

“Things are nice,” the President continued. “He’s a nice guy. But, I don’t know what the future will hold. I’ll be here for four years, and we’ll see. I kind of envy his ability to go home whenever he wants,” she said smiling.

“You told me that when you were Governor, he stayed in Havre, as well,” I said.

“Yes, that’s home for him, and his job is there,” the President of the United States said to me.

“So, you haven’t considered staying together for now,” I said with more of a question.

She looked down, and said, “No, we really haven’t. Over the last few years things worked out OK with me at my work, and him at his work on the ranch, with us joining up periodically. Now, it will be harder, though.”

She looked down, and then quickly sat up straighter. “I’m sorry, but I don’t have much time today,” she said quickly.

I raised my eyebrows. “To get anything done, we will have to spend some time together,” I said rather clinically.

“I know, but today, I’m swamped,” she said, and it was hard to argue with the Commander in Chief.

While I was sure she was busy, especially at the beginning of her time in office, it was also clear that she was avoiding talking about her marriage. She deliberately changed the subject, and as her therapist, it was my job to make note of that. But, I had never had a patient who had nuclear bomb codes waiting outside her door before.

“Well, can I ask that we meet somewhere else,” I said. “It’s hard to talk with all of this...” I looked around, and said, “with all of this history around”.

She smiled, “Yes, it can be overwhelming,” she agreed. “There are rooms upstairs, near the living quarters and we could use one of those spaces. “Great,” I said.

We both got up, and I said, “You know, your inaugural address was inspiring.”

“Thanks,” she added quickly. “I’ve always been good at that since Mr. Haney’s Civics class,” she said with a wink.

I left the office, and the secretary smiled at me outside the door. “Dr. West, you can turn right at the end of the hallway, and that will lead you to the exit,” she said.

“Thank you, Ma’am,” I tried to say politely, and passed the young military officer who was still sitting ramrod straight in his chair.

I turned right, and was met by a young man in the standard blue suit. “Dr. West, I’m Anthony Moore with the administration. Can I have a few minutes of your time?” he said.

I said, “Sure” and followed him down the hall. We made a few turns, and walked some distance down marble hallways decorated with paintings of this famous American or another. Moore opened the door, and sat me down across from Frank Asbury. Moore sat down next to me. It soon became clear that I was being ambushed.

“Good afternoon, Dr. West,” Frank Asbury said to me and smiled as he took off his glasses. “How are things going so far with your job down here,” he said slowly.

“Fine,” I said. “I suppose I’m trying to get settled like everybody else.”

“Did you have a good meeting with the President,” he asked. I looked toward the door, and Moore was sitting in the space between me and the door. He was protecting the exit, and there was no escape without making a scene.

“Yes, it was quite pleasant. I have to bone up on some medicare financing numbers, though,” I said.

“Uh, huh,” he said. Moore was staring at me. “It’s good of you to help the President settle in too,” Asbury said, looking directly at me.

“Well, she’s the boss, and I should do a better job preparing the numbers,” I said, sticking to my story.

Asbury cleared his throat, and smiled at me for a moment. Then, the smile quickly vanished from his face. “Right. Well, you’re a doctor, and if there is anything... um, wrong - with The President, it would be important for all of us to know,” Asbury pointedly said.

“Sure,” I said. “But, she didn’t seem to have a fever, and there was no cough, no sign of difficulty breathing or chest pain,” I added trying to sound professional.

“So, she seems OK,” I said blankly, staring directly at Frank Asbury.

Asbury looked down, and shook his head back and forth. “Well, if there is anything I, or Mr. Moore here can do to help you out, let us know,” Asbury said. He looked at me and paused. “We’ll be around,” he said, staring straight at me.

“Thank you. That’s nice of you guys,” I said, staring back.

Asbury looked at me, and finally said, “Mr. Moore can take you back to the entrance.”

“Thank you. Try to keep warm out there,” I said. “It’s much colder here than in Philadelphia.”

Moore walked me through the various halls, making this turn and that, and I finally arrived at the familiar entrance. “Dr. West, here is my card, in case there is anything you want to tell us,” he said.

“Thank you, I forgot to bring one of mine,” I replied, putting his card in my pocket. He seemed to sneer just a bit, and I hurried to greet the security guard at the door as fast as I could. “Good day, sir,” the guard said.

I quickly left the door, and was hit by the stiff cold breeze. “I guess that’s why the designers of the Metro wouldn’t do well here,” I thought.

Leaving The White House and tried to brace myself against the cold breeze that seemed to be whipping from all directions. I entered a coffee shop, and a middle aged man in a trench coat entered it also behind me.

Suspiciously, I got in line, and then left the line quickly to enter the bathroom. I wasn’t sure whether I should be frightened, or careful, but made sure to stay in the bathroom for a minute. I finally left the bathroom, and the middle aged man who followed me in was adding milk to his coffee at the bar. I walked up to him, and said, “See anything interesting today?”

He looked at me rather quizzically, and said, “Well the Wizards played well.” I wasn’t sure if he was referring to Washington’s professional basketball team, or the team that played games with higher stakes a few blocks across town.

I smiled at him, and got in line for coffee. I followed him carefully, and he left the coffee bar a few minutes later. I stayed for a good twenty minutes, wondering if I should go outside. Finally, I left, and looked right and left as I exited the coffee shop.

I was the President’s psychiatrist.

It was beginning to dawn on me that there were a lot of people who would want to know what I knew or what I would find out. I would have to be careful. But, I didn’t know how to do that. I began to walk toward the Metro station, and stopped every block to look into a store window, but really to see if anyone around me stopped as well, shadowing my movements.

Finally, I merged into the crowd at the Metro, and entered a car, and then walked to the far end of the train. Was I being paranoid? I smiled to myself thinking that was an interesting question for a psychiatrist to ask himself.

Chapter 34

At work in Philadelphia, the next day, I thought I should earn some of my money and investigate medicare funding. I knew that Asbury or his people would surely question me further, and I should be prepared at least enough to put forth a ruse. But, the federal budget can command only so much interest, and after a while, I shut off my computer, and turned on the TV in my office.

On the news channel were more scenes of demonstrations in Syria. People in the street were chanting “Down with the USA, Down with Israel. Down with the USA, Down with Israel.” The anchor began to comment on the situation, saying, “Demonstrations throughout Syria continue as the streets fill with people demonstrating against the United States. Tensions continue to mount in the area. Extremist groups such as ‘The Quest’ claim support and influence on the streets. The streets are filled with rhetoric claiming America does not respect Islam, and must be punished. And today, Vice President Smithson appeared on our morning show to discuss the situation further. Here are his comments,” the anchor said.

The TV screen was then filled with the serious face of Vice President Smithson, sitting on a couch with the hosts of the morning show.

Smithson was saying, “Elements like these in the Middle East continue to denigrate America, and continue to stand against our ally in the area, Israel. This kind of behavior will not be tolerated by our administration. We continue to be in planning meetings to discuss the best way to confront such a policy on the streets of Syria. It is of great concern that President Hameen of Syria is not controlling this. If he cannot control the violent admonitions coming out of his country, it will be a serious situation, indeed.”

The morning host then asked, “Would military solutions be considered?” Vice President Smithson leaned forward on the couch, and said, “I’ve been in Washington a long time, and I can tell you that all options are on the table. When I ran for President, I made it clear in the various debates that a strong national defense is our highest priority.”

The “all options are on the table” sound bite continued to lead many of the news casts that day. But, it wasn’t clear to me what that meant. I suppose that was the point. He also made it clear what he felt “when I ran for president”.

Smithson made it clear to the interviewers that he was sitting in The White House and seemed to gloss over the fact that his was not the chair in The Oval Office I had seen. Politically, he wanted to express not only his concern but also that the United States had the power to act. The other line, "I've been in Washington a long time" was of even more concern to me.

Of course, President Stonegate was a newcomer, a woman from Montana. In the campaign, people made fun of her lack of international experience. She was the winner, but Smithson dogged her throughout the primary campaign. Stonegate managed to win the nomination by making him the Vice Presidential nominee. I knew from my limited experience in politics that people who lose elections always feel that the wrong person won. At least, I felt that way.

And, I knew that Frank Asbury, Smithson's long time man, was very interested in what I was doing, and in what Stonegate was saying or thinking.

I tried not to be paranoid, but all I could remember was John Sturgis telling me, "Watch your back, Sir."

I resolved to delve more into the medicare budget, and mental health policy. This was the big leagues.

The Washington Wizards were playing in the NBA, but I was not sure if there were any Wizards in The White House.

Later in the afternoon, I went to a committee meeting for Philadelphia State. Their budget was not looking any better. The accountants were trying to argue that with new cardiovascular beds coming on board that they would be able to make more money soon. My attention faded. They had already eviscerated my department. My pound of flesh was already taken, and I had little else to give them.

After I drove home, I ate dinner in front of the TV, which I was doing far too often these days. The evening news casts showed scenes of demonstrating mobs in the streets of Syria, and again played the “I’ve been in Washington a long time, and I can tell you that all options are on the table” line from Vice President Smithson’s morning interview. I had only limited experience in politics, and I don’t think that political exchanges in Lancaster County after bake sales were the same as power wrangling in the White House. I didn’t know what to feel, but I did know I needed to be careful. I now understood the President’s outburst demanding that I not take any notes whatsoever.

On TV, after the news of an affair by a rock star whose name I didn't recognize, the news program brought the weather. A storm was coming, the chirpy weather girl said. We should all prepare.

Chapter 35

Boarding the Amtrak train the next Wednesday seemed a bit easier. Of course, there were both men and women getting on the train. I was less angry at the bomb sniffing dogs, and while I wish they were there in November, I realized that it was a bit silly to get angry at a dog.

This time, I brought a satchel of papers on federal spending on health care both to read on the train, and to use as a prop when I entered The White House. I knew that carrying a bag into The White House would attract more attention from the guards, but I welcomed the attention from the guards. I knew personally they were trying to protect me. And, when I entered those doors, I was beginning to feel another tug of war going on. Standing close to the people who were trying to protect me was reassuring.

I entered The White House, and walked over to the waiting area I visited last week. The man who entered The White House with me followed me into the waiting room, and selected a seat across the room from my own. Conspicuously, I opened my satchel, and took out the budget papers I examined on the train. I was actually starting to get interested in them, when an hour passed. I looked at my watch, and it read “12:20”.

John Sturgis emerged in the doorway of the room, looking perpetually ruffled. “Dr. West, can I see you for a moment,” he said. I walked into the hallway, and he said that the President was very busy, and could not see me today, and offered his apologies.

My reflex was to forget politics and think as a psychiatrist. I had decades more experience with that, in any event. My last meeting with Stonegate ended with a discussion on her separation from her husband, who was a “good guy”. Usually, when patients suddenly cancel a session, they are avoiding something. That’s why The Oracle, and all analysts bill for a session even if it is cancelled. Paying for it encourages people to come and talk about difficult things. “Working through the resistance” is the phrase we psychiatrists use.

With this patient, though, I didn't know what to think. Was she avoiding talking about difficult things, or was she just busy with the world, with fights in her administration, or defending me and other Americans from attack. I didn't know.

I walked down the hall with John Sturgis as all of this was buzzing through my head. Sturgis turned to me, and said, "She'll meet with you next week, and we are looking for a room upstairs to use."

"Thanks, John," I said. "But you should know," I said whipping my head around in different directions, "after my meeting last week, as well as after my last meeting with the President in Helena, Frank Asbury wanted to talk to me to find out how the meeting went."

Sturgis' eyebrows went up. "What did you tell him," he asked suddenly interested.

"I told him that I was unable to get the President to agree to extend medicare benefits," I said.

Sturgis smiled, "Tell him, too, that you are going to keep working on it."

Sturgis kept walking down the hall with me. “Do you want me to walk you out?” he asked. While I wanted the company, and the protection in here, I said, “No, I know you’re busy, and wouldn’t it look odd you protecting me?” “Probably,” he said. “But, if you have worries, give me a call.”

“I will, indeed,” I said. Comforted by having my own Navy Seal and former Stanford defensive back on my side, I shook his hand, and hurried to the security guard. I showed him my satchel, and the guard said. “Thank you, Sir, have a good day.” I thanked him, and shook his hand. He looked at me oddly. I’m guessing that was the first time this week he got that reaction from somebody he frisked.

Quickly leaving The White House, I looked around, and of course, there were all kinds of people walking on the sidewalks. Some were walking toward me, and some were walking away. It all seemed too confusing for me.

I didn’t want to appear suspicious, and I didn’t want to appear frightened. Not knowing what to do, I thought I should simply be a tourist. There were plenty of those people in Washington at all times of the year.

“Now, I have the afternoon in Washington,” I thought. I wondered what to do. Washington is filled with historic sites, and the Smithsonian Museums are among the best in the world. I decided to visit another branch of government, and walked over to the US Capitol.

The walk down Pennsylvania Avenue took longer than I anticipated, and in the winter wind of Washington, I was out of breath. I stopped along Pennsylvania Avenue for minute to catch my breath, and looked back for a second. Anthony Moore suddenly dropped out of site from my vision into a store front. The Vice President’s man was following me. I wasn’t meeting with the President today at The White House. Did he think I was meeting with her elsewhere?

I looked back, and he was nowhere to be seen. I walked across the street to a newsstand, and bought a paper, and held it up to my face, trying to disguise myself.

I tried to continue the charade because that is what the spies in the movies seemed to do. I realized that holding a newspaper in the wind only resulted in frustration, and was not a help. It occurred to me that my years of training as a psychiatrist would do little to help me be a spy. I folded the paper, and more obviously, looked down the street in both directions. There was no sight of Moore, Asbury, or anyone else I recognized. Of course, there were an infinite number of places anyone could hide in the busy urban street.

I gave up the cloak and dagger, and continued on my walk. I knew from my experiences in Helena and now in Washington that they were very interested in me, and seemed to monitor my appointments. They knew I was a psychiatrist, and that I was meeting with the President. I didn't know what to do. I thought for a moment in front of the store, and decided simply to continue to the Capitol. There was no reason for this decision other than that was my original plan. I didn't know what else to do

Centuries ago, the capitol was placed in Washington on top of a hill to show off its elevated status. But, walking up the hill and then around to the visitor's entrance let me know how really out of shape I was.

I waited for a tour group to start, joining a group of tourists who seemed much less interested in me than I was in looking at all of them. Finally, I decided to let the paranoia go. The tour guide joined us, gave a welcome, and then a description of the history of the building, letting us know when it was built and bland facts about its dimensions. As we progressed along the tour, my attention began to fade as I wrestled with my coat, switching it from hand to hand.

We then entered a large, circular magnificent hall, called Statuary Hall. Here, the tour guide lectured, each of the fifty states was allowed to place the statues of two of its citizens of its choosing to be honored in the rotunda at the center of our nation's Capitol building. He asked from which state the visitors hailed, and not surprisingly, the visitors were from all corners of the nation. With each state, he showed them the two famous citizens who had been memorialized in stone here in the Capitol building.

I turned, and started to look around at all of the statues. The tour guide continued to babble on, and I was taken by the impressive site of America's greats immortalized in stone. After walking around, I felt uncomfortable, and could swear I was being watched.

I looked at the tour guide, and she was again giving directions for various states' statues. But, the feeling that someone was watching me did not go away. I took a step back, and bumped into something. I quickly turned around, and there, I was met by a set of familiar eyes.

As I looked up, I saw the visage of Jeanette Rankin, representing Montana. The first woman elected to the House of Representatives, and just as quickly voted out of the same House twice, after voting against war twice, was back in the Halls of Congress. Montana chose to send a pacifist to represent them in Statuary Hall. She looked familiar, still with that school teacher's dress. But, she looked a bit more proud here than her statue in Helena. Her head was lifted a bit higher, and she was looking toward me.

"Why did you follow me, here, Jeanette?" I asked out loud. The news from the last days drifted through my mind. "All options are still on the table, Jeanette," I said, and then I reached down and rubbed her left foot.

Chapter 36

The week ended, and I spent my weekend sealed in my house. Since Terese's death, all kinds of things accumulated throughout the shelves and counters of the building's corners, squeezing me out over the months. I was determined over this weekend to clean out the pizza boxes and inertia that accumulated in the corners of my house and in myself, and then to actually clean. The bathroom demanded my attention first, and I branched out from there. Saturday was claimed by filling twelve trash bags, but by the end of the day, I was able to see the entire house again.

By Sunday, I was able to emerge from the hall into the kitchen. While I was debating what may have been growing in old food containers, a familiar voice on the Sunday morning Washington talk show grabbed my attention. Frank Asbury appeared again talking about how important to the national honor it was to make sure we monitor the situation in Syria closely. “We know they are harboring terrorist groups, including ‘The Quest’,” he said. “President Hameen has not shown the slightest inclination to bring the group to justice, and in fact he continues to fuel criticism of our country,” Asbury said, looking intently at the television camera.

“This is not acceptable to the civilized countries of the world. We cannot continue to accept this outrage,” he said. “Terrorist groups based in Syria attacked the United States, and they continue to operate unopposed in that state. The government there has not taken any steps to bring these groups to justice, and in fact, they seem to continue to foment antagonism toward The United States of America. We were attacked, and the perpetrators of that attack remain at large. Syria is a state where antagonism toward the US is building,” Asbury told the news anchor.

I stared at the TV. When asked again what options the administration was considering, he said, "Vice President Smithson and President Stonegate are considering all options. All options remain on the table."

"Interesting order of people to make the decision, Frank," I said out loud to the TV.

The news show then switched to video footage of protests in Syria. President Hameen again stood defiantly in front of a large crowd of demonstrators. While what he said was not translated, it didn't need to be. He was raising his fist, and calling out, and the demonstrators were chanting back in return.

“Next, we will have the thoughts of the Syrian ambassador to the United States, Ambassador Ali Urain,” the discussion show anchor said. The TV panned over to show a pleasant looking man with a dark mustache in a dark suit. When asked to comment on Frank Asbury’s comments, Ambassador Urain said, “We in Syria take the rule of law very seriously. We do not condone the acts of violence anywhere, including acts against the United States of America. But, we also have the right to act as a sovereign nation, and conduct our own affairs.” When asked about the demonstrations, he said, “The Syrian people have the right to express their opinions without any outside interference. I’m sure that you would agree that freedom to express opinions is essential for any people,” he said. When asked about terrorist groups such as ‘The Quest’, he said that Syria “continues to search for them, and will cooperate with the international community.”

The rhetoric continued to climb. “That’s scary stuff,” I said out loud to the TV. “What do you mean that ‘all options are on the table?’ Lord knows enough people have died.”

The rest of the Sunday morning news show carried a discussion of a variety of news journalists talking about their insights into the situation.

I was assuming that these insights were the same described in their various newspapers or television outlets, but here they were presented with great gravity. I returned to the sports pages.

After the news show was over, I ate lunch and settled in front of a Philadelphia 76er game. As usual, late in the game they were losing, and their futile attempt at victory was interrupted by my cell phone ringing.

“Hello, this is Dr. West,” I said.

“Dr. West, this is John Sturgis at The White House. We will need you to come to Washington tomorrow,” he said.

“But my meeting with the President is on Wednesdays,” I said.

“Yes, Dr. West, I know, but we will need you to come to The White House tomorrow,” Sturgis said again.

I thought out loud into the phone. “Let’s see, I think I have an executive committee meeting at Philadelphia State tomorrow in the early afternoon,” I said.

“Dr. West, you’ll have to change that. The President will meet with you tomorrow at 2 p.m.,” Sturgis said.

Surprised at the tone in his voice, I said, “All right, I’ll rearrange my schedule, and meet you at The White House tomorrow at 2 p.m.”

“Thank you Dr. West. The President appreciates you changing your schedule for the meeting. I’ll see you tomorrow,” he said.

“All right, I’ll be there,” I said, and stared blankly at the TV.

Chapter 37

The next morning, I boarded the Amtrak train bound for Washington, and took my satchel full of medicare budget papers, but I could not think why I would need to change my visit time. In the last appointment time, I didn't even meet with the President and on the visit before, we met for only a few minutes. "I guess I'll find out soon," I said to myself, and concentrated more on the front page than on the sports page during the trip to Washington.

The front page continued to focus on the escalating protests in Syria. Numerous "unnamed sources" again said that "The Quest" continued their operations out of Syria, but gave no specific location for their headquarters. Another article stated that Syria was itself not stable, with a variety of factions loudly vying for control of the popular opinion, and of the government.

I again entered through The White House gates, showing my satchel to The White House Security Guards. My name was on the Monday list of visitors, and I carefully walked into the waiting area, and I selected a seat in the back of the room so I could keep the door and those in the room in full view. No one seemed to be looking at me, but I continued to scan the room for Asbury, Moore, or anyone else who could have a special interest in my meeting.

At ten minutes before two, John Sturgis appeared at the door, and said, “Dr. West, thank you for coming,” and started to walk away. I got up and began to follow him. “We have a room upstairs in the President’s quarters where you can meet,” he said. I could only think to myself that I’ve never made a house call before, let alone one in The White House.

Sturgis and I entered the elevator, which was guarded by Secret Service, and the agent nodded at Sturgis as we entered. Sturgis guided me upstairs, and when the elevator door opened, I was struck by how much the living quarters of The White House reminded me of a five star hotel. Paintings on the wall decorated the hallway, and while I didn't recognize who they were, I assumed they were former Presidents or portraits of the good or the great from the past. He showed me to a small sitting room with two Victorian chairs and a small couch in front of a coffee table. Out the window of the room, we could see the leafless limbs of the trees swaying in the February wind.

"The President will be here in a few minutes," Sturgis said.

"Can you fill me in on what this is about?" I asked.

"The President will inform you, Sir," he said very formally, and left the room.

I picked one of the Victorian chairs, and put my coat on the couch. Only minutes later, President Amanda Stonegate entered the room, and purposefully closed the door behind her.

She quickly sat down, looked at me, and said "Thank you for coming today. We need to talk," she said with some urgency.

I nodded, and looked at her. She was dressed again in a business suit, but seemed almost out of breath as she began to talk. "I have to talk to you," she said.

"I almost got myself shot Saturday night," she blurted out.

My jaw dropped, and I tried to give her time to explain as I felt my pulse quicken. I tried to let my training take over, and I willed myself not to say anything.

Amanda Stonegate started to talk, looking down at the carpet between us. "I invited my sister's two girls here for the weekend, and told Susie and Joan that they were coming for a sleepover. The youngest, Ryan, is only six, and he was really too young to come all this way. The two girls flew in Saturday afternoon, and we had a great time. The White House was like a resort to them, with the swimming pool, and the bowling alley, and the basketball court the Obamas' installed," she said very quickly.

She took a deep breath, swallowed hard, and continued. "After dinner, we saw a movie, and then I put them to bed. It was all very nice, and reminded me so much of home," she said.

Her eyes began to tear, and I continued to allow her to talk. She then leaned forward in her chair, and her eyes flashed fright. It was unmistakable, and I had never seen anything like it in her before.

“About an hour after they went to bed, I looked out in the hall, and I saw a big man walking towards Joan’s room. I immediately jumped out and ran down the hall towards him. I was about to jump him when he whirled around and flashed a gun at me. He saw me, dropped his gun, and said quickly, ‘Is everything all right, Ma’am?’ I stopped, and mumbled something about checking on the girls,” Stonegate said.

“It was just one of secret service agents making his rounds, but it spooked me. If he wasn’t so quick, or maybe so good at his job, he would have leveled his gun at me, since I was charging him like that.”

I nodded, and she continued to talk. “It reminded me of ... before,” she said.

I tilted my head back. Amanda Stonegate put her head in her hands, and began to cry softly.

“Can you tell me about it?” I asked slowly.

She sighed, and then inhaled and exhaled deeply a few times. Finally, she squinted her eyes at me, and said, “There’s a lot about my growing up that I didn’t tell you,” she said.

I only nodded, and tried to appear understanding. She was obviously quite upset.

“My father was a big guy,” President Stonegate said. “And, he drank a lot at times,” she said, with her eyes drifting off to my right, and seemed to lose focus. “When I was about ten, he started to come to my room at night, and would say things like, ‘You’re such a pretty girl’, and...” she stopped for a minute, and looked down. “And, then he began to touch me, rubbing between my legs, and feeling my chest, but at that time, there wasn’t much to feel. He was usually pretty drunk, and he would always says something like, ‘You’re my special girl’ and he would continue to grope me. This would happen maybe twice a month, and always when he was real drunk,” Stonegate said.

“I’m so sorry,” I quickly said.

“No, No, let me get this out,” she said quickly. “Over the next two years, he would come at times at night, and would wake me up and grope me.”

She looked at her lap, stopped for a minute, and then continued to talk to me. “It was awful but I didn’t know what to do. Then, one night when he came, when I was about thirteen, he started squeezing my breasts, and then he lay on top of me. All I remember was that he was so big that I was having trouble breathing with him laying on me like that. And, then he ripped at my underwear, and he started having sex with me. I was petrified, and I had no idea then what he was doing. He stopped after a few minutes, and said, ‘You’re my special, pretty girl’, and then left the room.”

“I laid there awake for hours,” she said slowly.

“The next night, I didn’t know what to expect, and sat in bed for hours but he didn’t come. I just wanted to forget about it,” She said, and then began again with clenched teeth.

“Then, about a month later, he got drunk again, and again came to my room. Again, he groped me and grabbed at my crotch, and pulled down my underwear, and laid on top of me and thrust himself in me until he groaned. Then he left, and didn’t say anything at all to me this time,” Amanda Stonegate went on.

She quietly moaned, and grabbed a throw pillow, and held it close to her, seemingly for protection. She rocked back and forth, and then looked at me.

“Did you tell anyone?” I asked.

Amanda Stonegate looked up at me with those big brown eyes, but now, they looked incredibly sad and empty. “I did,” she said. “That next morning I went to my mother, and told her everything,” she said. “My mother was peeling potatoes, and she simply continued to peel one potato after another as I tried to talk with her. She didn’t look at me; she just looked down and continued to peel potatoes. Finally, she said, ‘Well, Amanda, you are getting to that age. That’s just the way men are sometimes,’ and that was it.

I tried to get her attention, and I said, ‘But, Mom,’ and then Amanda Stonegate looked away.

Stonegate was silent for a long time, and finally said, “And then my mother said, ‘Just try to lie still, Amanda’, and my mother dabbed her eye and continued to peel the potatoes,” she continued.

My mouth went dry, and I looked across the room at the President. She was cowering in the corner of the couch, holding a pillow, rocking slightly back and forth. “I’ve never told anyone this whole story before,” she said.

“I know it must be hard for you,” I said slowly.

She nodded. “Over about the next year, my father would come to my room, usually on a Saturday night, usually drunk, once or twice a month. It was always the same thing. He smelled of booze, and would say, ‘You’re my special girl’, and would grope me for a few minutes, and then would lie on top of me and have sex,” she said, now almost angrily.

“What did you do?” I asked. She looked at me, fixed her eyes angrily at mine, and said, “I tried to lie still.”

She looked down, and then quickly back at me. “Then, one Saturday night, he was drunk again, and I could hear him coming down the hall. I closed my eyes shut, and tensed...waiting for him. But, he didn’t come,” Stonegate said. “I opened my eyes, and then listened, but still no one was at my door. I got out of bed, as quietly as I could, and opened my door a crack. He was leaning against the wall down the hall, and was looking at my sister Mary’s bedroom door. By this time, I was fourteen, and Mary was eleven,” she said, looking at the wall beyond my shoulder.

“He grunted, and started to go for Mary’s door,” Amanda Stonegate continued. “I looked down the hall, and saw a fireplace poker leaning against the hallway entry. I ran and grabbed it, and then ran as fast as I could down the hall.”

She gritted her teeth, and raised her arms above her head, and said, "Then, with all my might I swung the poker down across his head and shoulders. Even though he was such a big guy, he slumped to the floor," Stonegate said slowly.

My mouth remained open, and was so dry at this point that I couldn't say anything at all.

Stonegate continued and said, "So, I was in the hallway holding the fireplace poker, and my father was laying face first on the floor in the middle of the hall. I had no idea if he was dead, if I had knocked him out, or if he simply passed out from the alcohol. But, I remember thinking at the time, 'I wish you are dead'. I put the poker back against the wall where I found it, and looked down the hall at my father on the floor," she said to me, looking me square in the eyes.

I returned her gaze.

The President of the United States said, "I went back to my room, closed the door, and listened for any noise. None came. Everything was quiet for at least an hour, and I think I eventually fell asleep," she said, and shook her head.

"The next morning, my father and mother were at the breakfast table," she said simply, and paused, looking away.

“My father was complaining of a headache, and my mother gave him some aspirin, and said something about his drinking. That was it,” The President said, shaking her head back and forth.

“I waited a whole day, and nobody said anything in my house. I guess that was not unusual,” she said, “and finally, I left the house and went out to the paddock where my Dad was feeding the horses. I walked up to him, and said, ‘It was me that cracked your head the night before last’. And, I watched his eyes grow big,” she said as she stopped and her eyes locked onto mine. “Then I told him, ‘if I ever see you going in to Mary’s room at night, I’ll make sure I get you better than that.’ I stared at him with all the contempt that had been growing over those few years,” she said. “And,” she said, “You need to know that I have a kitchen knife under my pillow, and I’ll be waiting for you,” she added.

Stonegate continued to stare at me. “My father just looked down, and didn’t say anything to me. I guess in retrospect, he must have been ashamed. But then, I didn’t know what to think. I turned around and immediately went to the kitchen, and took the biggest knife I could find, and put it under my pillow in my room,” she said.

She stopped for a moment, and said, “Over the next few nights, I waited, not quite sure what I would do if he came. But, he never came again. I told Mary a few years ago that Dad molested me, and asked her if he ever touched her. She said no, but I’m not sure. I do know she started drinking again not long after that,” Amanda Stonegate said looking away.

President Stonegate was quiet for a time after that. She looked out the window at the howling Washington wind. I stared at her, and then at the deep red curtains covering the windows. They allowed a small amount of light to come into the room.

Then, Amanda Stonegate looked up at me with her deep brown eyes even more sad than before, if that was possible. A tear was streaming down her cheek, but she did nothing to try to wipe it away.

She looked at me, and continued, “I had belly pain for a while after that, probably for at least six months to a year.” She paused for a moment, and looked down. “I told my mother that I had pain, and she told me it was just menstrual cramps, and gave me midol. Eventually the pain went away over time, and I didn’t pay much attention to it,” she said.

She quickly continued, “It wasn’t until I was well into college that I saw an ad encouraging college girls to get a pelvic exam. When I finally got the exam, the doctor stopped and looked at me on the exam table. He asked me if I had ever been raped, and I thought the easiest answer was to say, ‘yes, years ago’. He asked to speak with me in his office afterwards. I dressed and he said I had a lot of vaginal scarring and he was sorry to have to tell me that. Because of the scarring, he said that he would send cultures to the lab to investigate. It turned out that I also had a bad gonorrhoeal infection as well. The only person I ever had sex with at that point was my father, so the infection had been cooking for years. I was treated with antibiotics for a few weeks, but the damage was done. The doctor told me after an ultrasound was done a few weeks later that my tubes were scarred from the infection, and I would never be able to have children,” Stonegate continued.

She looked down and again began to sob.

President Amanda Stonegate continued to look wounded, and then sat up a bit straighter, and let the pillow drop to the couch.

Stonegate averted her gaze away from me for a moment, and then looked back at me.

I remembered the events from the weekend leading to this emergency session with her. “How old are your sister’s girls?” I asked.

“Susie is 14 and Joan is 11,” she said, and then looked down.

“And you ran down the hall toward the Secret Service Agent on a Saturday night?” I asked.

Amanda Stonegate looked at me, with tears coming down her face, and nodded her head up and down.

“Do you understand how familiar that setting is compared to when you were growing up,” I asked.

She nodded, and said, “That’s why I had Sturgis call you. No one knows why I wanted to talk to you, just that it was important that I see you.”

My mouth was open. Amanda Stonegate fully understood what was happening in her mind as she rushed the large man in the hallway who was standing by her eleven year old niece’s door. She turned to look at me, and her eyes locked in with mine for a full minute. I tried to look away, but I couldn’t.

The President looked down, and she slowly said to me, “After your wife was killed just before the election, and you said you forgave the terrorists, I couldn’t believe it.” She looked directly at me, and continued.

“The importance of the terrorist attack to what we were trying to convey in the campaign was obvious to everyone, and I have to say that we wanted to use the event to make a point. But, I also wanted to meet you. When you again said you forgave the terrorists, and I knew you were a psychiatrist, I knew I had some things to learn,” and she looked at me with those big brown eyes, that now seemed a bit more open.

“Now, I understand,” I said. “This will take a few sessions to sort through, but a lot of what you’ve told me now makes sense,” I said. Amanda Stonegate looked at me with questions in those big brown eyes.

“For now, do you understand that running down the hall toward the secret service agent makes sense?” I said.

She only looked at me.

“You see, in our lives, time is relative,” I told her. “Memories are stored in our brain, but aren’t coded according to time. They can be called upon when something triggers them. And, when those triggers hit, it’s almost like you are reliving the experience. So, when the big man was going down the hall to the eleven year old relative you care about, it triggered the event from the past - when you attacked your father,” I said.

The President of the United States looked at me through her tears, and nodded her head slowly.

“And a couple of other things,” I said, leaning forward, looking at her. “You know, your father attacking you was not your fault,” I said.

Amanda Stonegate looked down, and said, “I guess so,” unconvincingly.

“We need to talk more about that,” I said. “And,” I said, looking deep into those brown eyes, “You have to be one of the strongest women I ever met.”

She looked back at me, and wiped her eyes. “Right now, I don’t feel like it,” she said.

I smiled, and said, “Right now, I know it. Are you able to meet on Wednesday?”

The President of the United States nodded slowly, and said, “I’ll make time.”

I started to rise out of my Victorian chair, and took several steps toward the door. But, then, I felt as if I had to stop, and I looked at the President on the couch. “There’s one more thing I have to tell you, but not about this,” I said.

She looked at me blankly, seemingly drained.

“Just so you know, after our last two visits, Frank Asbury collared me and was very interested in our conversations. I told Sturgis too,” I said.

Stonegate glared at me, “and what did you tell Asbury?” she said quickly. “I told him that I was trying to lobby you for an increase in medicare funding for mental health,” I said with a smile.

She smiled back, and quickly said, “Not one cent more in taxes,” and those brown eyes seemed to regain a bit of the famous glow.

“Well, if I run into him again, I don’t have to lie, now,” I said.

The President smiled weakly, and she said, “We’ll meet Wednesday.”

Chapter 38

I left the carpeted room, deep in the living quarters and walked through the halls upstairs in The White House. The lavish decorations were still there, and the paintings of the good and the great decorated the historic hallways. The wallpaper was there, covering up decades of history. I passed a secret service agent, and nodded. He said simply, “Good afternoon, Sir,” and seemed to look beyond me. I took the elevator downstairs.

Walking down the hall to the exit, I remained in a bit of a daze. The emotional impact of the story I just experienced continued to resonate in my head. I didn’t notice Frank Asbury walking up behind me.

“Dr. West, good day,” he said.

“Good afternoon,” I said softly, still staring ahead.

“Another meeting with the President...on, um... medicare again,” he asked, again with a sneer only faintly disguised.

“Yes, but she won’t raise taxes at all, and I’m afraid the idea is dead,” I said.

“Uh huh,” Asbury replied.

“You met with her upstairs in her quarters, huh. You and the President are getting pretty chummy,” he said, and nudged my arm.

I immediately turned, threw my satchel to the floor, and said through gritted teeth, “You son of a bitch,” and started to rush toward him.

Out of nowhere, John Sturgis appeared, grabbed my arm, and said, “Dr. West, I’m glad I caught you. Did you bring those medicare numbers?” He pulled me toward him effortlessly with one arm, and I continued to stare at Asbury.

“The numbers are in my bag,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Great,” Sturgis said. “Let’s take a look,” and he dragged me down the hall.

Sturgis pulled me into an open office, and said, “I don’t know what he said, but it doesn’t matter. You need to get a grip,” he said.

“That guy is a jerk,” I said.

“Yes, he is,” Sturgis said, staring at me.

“Look, he’ll try to trash talk you, and lots of other things to get an advantage, to get you to say something. He’s been at this game for a long time, and he’s good at it,” Sturgis said, still holding my arm.

Sturgis still had me trained in his eyes, and waited a moment. “Did you ever play football?” he finally said.

Confused, I could only I drop my jaw and stare at him. “Look, ignore the trash talk, focus, and make the play,” he said.

I closed my mouth, looked down, and then looked at Sturgis. “OK Coach, I’m sorry, I’ll do better next time,” I said.

Sturgis let go of my arm. He said, “You better, this is the big leagues.”

I looked at the door, and said to him. “I saw him on the Sunday morning interview shows. He’s positioning himself,” I said to Sturgis.

Sturgis again looked at me, and said, “No kidding. His boy lost the nomination, to a woman. They’re mad and they think they’re still in the game,” he said.

I looked at his wrinkled shirt, and tie that was slightly off center, and then I looked at John Sturgis and smiled. “And your job is to protect the deep part of the field,” I said.

Sturgis smiled back at me, “A good free safety does that, but the rest of the team has to do their job too,” he said. “Now, get those papers out of your bag, put them on the table, and ignore what I’m about to say to you,” Sturgis said under his breath.

I opened my bag, grabbed some of the medicare papers and put them on the desk in front of him.

“My God,” Sturgis said loudly, “Do you live in la-la land. We don’t have the money for this kind of increase. Look at this,” and he took his pen, and slashed it across one page and then another. “This isn’t even good accounting,” he said loudly. Finally he exhaled loudly, and said, “We are paying you to come up with ideas, not handouts. Get me something better than this.”

I tried hard to suppress the smile forming on my lips, and said with some feigned mild irritation, “I’m sorry John. I’ll go through the numbers again.”

Sturgis said loudly, “You better, West,” tapped my arm, and then stormed out of the room.

I gathered up the papers, put them in my bag, grabbed my coat, and walked down the hall toward the security guard.

Anthony Moore was standing there looking on the scene, and said, “Good afternoon, Dr. West.”

I replied, "Good afternoon," looked down, and hurried to the security guard. I gave him my bag to examine, and he gave it back to me.

"Thank you, Sir," he told me.

I walked out the gates of The White House, past the iron railings surrounding the building and hurried onto the sidewalk. I needed to walk, to try to clear my head and I just kept wandering. At first, I didn't know where I was going, but it didn't matter. My head with spinning with what my famous patient told me, and then about how I lost my cool in the hallway with the Vice President's man. My feet continued to pound the pavement, and I looked up, and saw the US Capitol building. I continued to walk to the visitor's entrance, and joined another tour.

This time, when we entered Statuary Hall, I immediately walked past the winged Grecian statue guarding the corner, and walked over to Jeanette Rankin's statue. She was still there in her long prairie dress, looking up and over the fights of this town. I stared at her, rubbed her left foot, and finally said, "Jeanette, can you get down off your pedestal and help me out here?"

Chapter 39

When I went back to work at Philadelphia State the next day, the security guard again gave me a big hello.

“Hi, Doc, are you going to be leaving us soon?” the security guard asked.

I looked at him with astonishment. They had gotten rid of my wards, but I had no idea Philadelphia State wanted to get rid of me.

“I’m not going anywhere, as far as I know,” I said.

The security guard looked at me with some puzzlement. “Well, yesterday, there were these two guys in suits who arrived, and wanted to know if you were here, and were walking around asking a lot of questions to folks. It’s not that big of a building, and since the President came to see you before the election, people think you’re a bit of a celebrity. You know how people talk around here, “ and then his voice trailed off. “So, the other guards and I were talking about it. Those guys were here for part of the morning, and then they quietly left,” he said. “We assumed you were up to something, Doc,” he said with a smile.

I turned to him, trying to control my surprise, and said, “No, I’m not going anywhere, but I am thinking of buying a new house. Those mortgage people are getting pretty strict.”

The security guard looked at me strangely, and said quietly, “Yeah, I guess so,” as his voice trailed off.

“If you see them back, or anybody else suspicious around, I’d appreciate it if you’d let me know,” I told him.

“Sure thing, Doc. We’ll help you out in any way we can,” he said.

I smiled at him, and said simply, “Thanks, it’s good to have friends around.” The security guard’s eyes followed me as I left and went up to my office. When I arrived at my office, I looked carefully around, and things looked the same as I left them two days ago. I picked up my phone, and wasn’t sure if it was bugged or not, and I had no idea how to check such a thing. I did know that lots of people were interested in my famous patient, and even more interested in what she may tell me. I sat down to think for a moment. I had no notes, no recordings, and no record of any kind about our meetings. I resolved to keep it that way. There was nothing traceable, except for me signing in at The White House, which they certainly knew about. I could do nothing more about security, and decided to go back to work.

The day at Philadelphia State School of Medicine continued as many other days before. But, I have to say my mind was elsewhere – thinking about my famous patient.

I received another resignation from one of my psychiatrists who was going to start a new job across town. We exchanged pleasantries, and best wishes. It was hard to feel bad for anyone drifting away from Philadelphia State at this point. I called Barbara, and we arranged to meet for lunch.

Barbara was excited about her new job. She was able to better organize things in the Pediatric clinic, and the staff morale there was improving. “It’s amazing how little changes can make big differences for people,” she said. “If you give people a little information on why things developed the way they did, they understand the situation a whole lot better. Then, we can make some changes that make sense for them,” she said between bites of her sandwich.

“So, how are you doing?” she asked after a pause.

She looked at me calmly, and I didn’t sense any big concern on her part. I found that rather reassuring. “I think I’m getting there,” I said. “Things at home are lonely at times, and I find myself watching more TV than before. But, I’m finding things at work to do, and that helps,” I added.

Barbara smiled at me. “I hear you’re a big shot going down to Washington every week,” she said.

I looked down, and said, “Well, being another bureaucrat helps fill a day of my week.”

Barbara continued to smile, and said, “I guess there are weasels there to battle as well.” I could only agree wholeheartedly.

Returning to my office, I flipped on the TV which now more than ever seemed locked onto show the news channel. Once again, the anchor was describing the unrest in Syria. “Groups there continue to take to the streets, and demand an end to ‘American Imperialism’, in their words. We had the opportunity to interview the Syrian ambassador to the United States, Ali Urain. Here is his reflection on the uprising in the streets,” the anchor said, and the TV switched to Ambassador Urain who again looked as though he could have been sitting at a corporate conference table somewhere in New York.

Ambassador Urain had an air of nonchalance, and said, “Yes, there are demonstrations in Syria, as the people continue to express their thoughts. We welcome their input. However, know that the peoples of Syria want and respect peace.” When asked what Syria is doing to ferret out terrorist groups thought to operate within their borders, he only paused.

After a moment, the Ambassador focused on the television cameras and added, “Of course, we are doing all we can to stop the spread of terrorism,” with the same nonchalance.

I could only shake my head, and turn off the TV. Returning to my computer, I tried to find out more about the history of medicare, wanting new papers for Sturgis to cross out if I needed his protection tomorrow. Things were smoldering in Syria, and at The White House. I wanted to be prepared.

Chapter 40

The end of February is a difficult time on the east coast. There, winter usually brings cold rain or slushy snow. We were all ready for it to be over. So, a grumpy group of train riders accompanied me to Washington. The bomb sniffing dogs were still present at the station, and on this train, there was also a dog that walked down the center aisle of the train. People smiled when they saw him. The dog could take care of problems, they thought. I knew better.

I entered The White House through the same entrance as usual, and the security guard now recognized me when I arrived. "Good morning, Dr. West," he said, and again slid my bag through the x-ray machine. He handed me my bag at the other end. He quickly checked me out, and passed me along.

"Thanks," I said to him, somewhat jealous of his machine that could so easily see inside things. I went over to the waiting room, and took a familiar seat, and started to read my papers, which is what everyone else in the room was doing as well. I looked above my papers, and tried to check each person out in the room. None of them seemed to have any interest in me at all. I took a deep breath.

John Sturgis again arrived at the door exactly on time, and motioned for me to come. This time, though, he waited for me, and walked point through The White House hallways. “I think The President is waiting for you upstairs,” he said. I entered the elevator, and as I emerged, Sturgis once again waved to the Secret Service Agent stationed in the hallway. “This is Andy West for the meeting with the President,” he said. The Secret Service agent only nodded imperceptively. Sturgis pointed to the sitting room where I met the President two days ago, and quietly left.

As I entered the room, I could see the President sitting in one of the ornate Victorian chairs. Her auburn hair was hanging down close to her shoulders, and the pink sweater she wore would certainly attract attention from any male in any restaurant or bar. She looked up with those brown eyes, and The President of the United States seemed to be a bit reticent to say anything. I closed the door, and took off my coat, and she said, “Good afternoon, Dr. West.”

I sat in the other Victorian chair in the room, and met her eyes. She looked over my shoulder for an instant, and then looked back at me. “I still feel shaken from our meeting the other day,” she said.

“I can understand that,” I said back to her.

She added, "I must say, I don't feel better getting that stuff out into the air. If anything, I feel worse," she said, looking at me expecting a quick prescription for feeling better.

"I know," I replied. "Talking about painful things is always painful," I said. "That only makes sense."

Amanda Stonegate just shrugged, and looked down.

"You went through some terrible experiences growing up," I said. This time, I looked down. "I only wish experiences like that weren't so common," I added.

She snapped her head toward me, and said, "What do you mean?"

"Study after study shows that about 20% of American women are victims of incest or rape by the time they can vote," I said. "In the business I'm in, I see it a lot," I added.

"Really?" she looked at me incredulously with those big brown eyes.

"Really," I said. "You see, no one talks about it, and it hides in the corners of families or in people's lives. But, it is there simmering, reading to boil over at times," I said, carefully looking back at her.

She nodded.

“You were a strong girl, then in your past, to fight back, even though you were only fourteen. Not everybody is that strong,” I said.

“Yes, but it had been going on for so long, for years,” The President said with a distant look in her eyes.

“And why did it end then?” I asked.

“Well, he was going after my sister,” she said with a flash of anger.

I nodded. “Yes,” I said calmly. “You fought back to protect your sister. Do you think you can fight to protect yourself?”

She looked at me with a question mark in her eyes. “You’re going to have to explain that one, Doc,” she said.

I smiled, and said, “The fact that you’re a fighter is clear to all Americans.”

She smiled back, and said, “Well, at least to the 49% who voted for me.” She flashed those big brown eyes at me again.

“Right, you are strong, and capable, and you’ve learned to be a fighter,” I said.

She shrugged her shoulders. “But, I didn’t fight back for years,” she said, looking down, beginning to tear up.

“Tell me about that,” I said.

She shifted positions in her Victorian chair.

“Well, when I was little, I looked up to my Dad,” she said.

“Literally and figuratively,” I added.

“Well, yes,” she said. He was this big presence on the ranch. He could handle horses, and could seem to protect us. He wasn’t real cuddly, and when he did take me on his lap when I was little, I remember feeling all enveloped, special, maybe,” she said, looking into the distance.

“What did he say when he was groping you?” I asked. She tightly closed her eyes, and said nothing. I waited.

She opened her eyes, and looked down, “You’re my special girl,” she said slowly. “You’re my special girl,” she repeated slowly.

“When he first came to your room at night, what did you think?” I asked.

“I don’t know. I was confused. I just remembered that he smelled bad. Then, when he started touching me, I was confused,” she said.

“Confused?” I echoed back to her.

“Yeah, I mean in the middle of the night, it was good to see him, and I didn’t mind a hug, but when it went beyond that, it was confusing,” she said.

I nodded understanding. “Then, as it went on, what did you think?” I asked.

“I guess I began to feel uncomfortable, and then began to think it was gross. At least, he was gross, drunk and smelly like that. Then, when jumped on top of me, I was scared, and the sex hurt,” the President said.

“And, you were only thirteen or fourteen,” I said.

She nodded, with a sad look in her eye.

I waited for a few moments, and Stonegate looked down, and began to cry again.

“So,” I said, “in the very beginning, it was good to see him. You felt ‘special,’” I said. “What else did he tell you,” I asked.

Stonegate looked down. “He said that I was pretty,” she said.

I nodded.

“And then, as time went on, it seemed confusing, and then gross, and then painful, and then...” I stopped.

“And then I fought back,” she said looking at me.

“And, who was at fault?” I asked.

She said, “Well, he was, I guess.”

I raised my eyebrows. "You guess?" I asked.

"Well, at first, I didn't mind him coming," she said slowly.

"I understand," I said, "So whose fault was it?" I repeated.

She looked away, and said, "He wasn't a totally terrible guy, you know."

I nodded, but insisted, "So whose fault was it?"

"It was his," she said slowly through her tears. "He shouldn't have...he shouldn't have... raped me," she said through her tears, and looked at me with her big brown eyes.

I no longer saw the President. As she shrank into her chair, holding a pillow in front of her for protection, she seemed to be a frightened little girl.

"Right," I said simply. After a moment, I added, "The fact that you were a little girl who didn't mind a hug from her father, or the fact that he had some good qualities as well doesn't change that."

She looked down, and slowly nodded her head up and down.

"A couple more things," I said. "He told you, 'you're my special, pretty girl,' right?" I asked. She nodded again. "How did that make you feel?" I asked.

“Well, at first, good, and then later, disgusted” she said with some anger.

“Madame President, are you pretty?” I asked. She looked at me with furrowed brows, and didn’t know quite what to say.

“Well, people say I am,” she added.

“So, are you?” I insisted.

“Yes, I suppose,” she said quietly.

“Yes,” I added. “You are pretty, but that doesn’t explain him raping you. Remember that about 20% of American women have been the victims of incest or rape by the time they get to college, and some of them are pretty, some of them are not, but they all have been attacked. It wasn’t your fault,” I said, looking into those confused eyes.

The President of the United States exhaled slowly.

“Now, let’s talk for a moment about protecting yourself,” I said. She looked up with those brown eyes beginning to focus at me.

“Yes, you’re a fighter, and you have been since you were a teenager. You learned from an early age how to fight back, even at big, powerful targets. You learned how to fight so well that you conquered a big oil company, a state budget, the national Republican Party, and now The White House,” I told her.

“You’re good at fighting, that’s for sure,” I went on, “but that’s not your only tool or your only talent, and you don’t always have to fight everyone. You don’t always have to carry mace on a date,” I said.

“Do I have to carry mace around you,” she smiled.

“No, Ma’am, you’re my boss. Remember, I work for you, remember,” and I looked reassuringly back at her. However, when those big brown eyes met mine, I was wondering if she should keep some mace around.

I cleared my throat, and continued.

“And, you are pretty. Always being in the public eye, that is an asset as well,” I said. She shrugged her shoulders and then nodded.

“And you are smart, and have a gift to use words to lead people,” I said.

She smiled, and said, “Well, ever since Mr. Haney’s civics class, at least.”

“I suspect it was well before that,” I replied.

“So, you can protect yourself now, but you don’t always have to fight,” I said.

“But sometimes I do,” The President and Commander in Chief said firmly.

“Yes, sometimes you do. That’s where your judgment and your smarts come into play,” I said.

She only nodded, and shifted in her chair.

“But, how do I forgive him?” she asked.

“You’ve started,” I replied. “The first step is to know who was at fault, who to assign the blame to, who to forgive,” I said.

She nodded, and was silent for several minutes. She looked at the wall over my shoulder, and I could see her replaying the memory in her mind. After a time, she looked back at me.

“It was such a terrible thing to do, to your own daughter,” she said to me.

I again nodded. “It was certainly terrible,” I replied. “I know it was horrible, and while I don’t know what it felt like, I can tell you that I’ve talked with many women who have survived the same experience. Not all of them were able to fight back, or to find a way to conquer fears and bring that fight in a useful way to other parts of their lives,” I added.

The President of the United States only looked down at the floor here on the second floor of The White House. “Are you saying that being raped made me who I am?” she said with some anger.

“That’s a good question,” I said slowly.

“We all are a product of our experiences. All of our experiences – both good and bad-contribute to make us who we are. Those experiences mix with our innate strengths and personality to fashion our responses to events and to life,” I paused.

Amanda Stonegate looked at me, and then looked out the window. “So, all those things are tied up in a neat little package,” she said with some sarcasm.

“No, it certainly is not a neat package,” I said. “It usually is messy, with experiences and thoughts and feelings all mixed together, ready to flow together. When they do flow together, they can often take you by surprise, like they did Saturday night,” I told her.

“Well, they certainly did take me by surprise, and the surprise almost got me killed,” President Amanda Stonegate added.

“I understand that is why we needed to meet on Monday, and probably why we need to meet at all,” I told her. She nodded her head.

She was quiet for a time, and then said, “I wanted to talk to you to find out how to forgive, how to move on.”

“Forgiving and moving on is not the same thing,” I told her. “You have been moving on with your life for decades.”

She was looking intently at me now. I continued, “You survived the experience, and went on to college and law school, and then into the state house, and now The White House.” The President continued to look at big with her big, open brown eyes.

“You do need to better understand what happened to you to get in better control of it, so it doesn’t take you over, or...” I paused for a moment to think.

“Or get myself shot by a secret service agent,” President Stonegate said.

I smiled, and said, “Well, yes, as a matter of fact.”

“I want to find out a little bit more about the whole situation,” I said.

“Now, how about your Mom?” I asked.

Amanda Stonegate shook her head back and forth. “She wasn’t a very strong person,” Stonegate said.

“And, she certainly wasn’t there for you,” I added. Amanda Stonegate nodded.

“You’ll need to forgive her too,” I said.

“I guess,” she said. “I’ve often wondered why she didn’t say or do anything to help me,” the President said with her voice drifting away.

“ I wondered if she was afraid of him, whether she was strong enough to do anything, whether she was happy he was molesting me instead of her, and even whether it happened to her when she was young, and she just expected it to happen to me as well,” she said with speed of her speech increasing.

I thought for a moment. “You could be right on all counts,” I added.

She shook her head, and said, “Yes, I have to forgive her too, but she’ll be easier.”

This time, I nodded.

“You know, your fallopian tubes were scarred and damaged. But people, as a whole, are different. Even though you have been scarred by this you can continue to grow. People don’t have to always repeat the same actions, the same thought, and the same reflex to fight first. They can learn,” I said.

“Even the smart, pretty ones,” she said with those eyes gleaming.

“Especially the smart pretty ones,” I said.

“You can call on the good things and good experiences you had growing up as well,” I said.

She looked at me as if I were clueless.

“Yes, I suppose there were good things growing up,” she said, “but that’s like asking,” she said pointing to the painting of her fellow republican president Abraham Lincoln on the wall, “Aside from that, how did you like the play, Mrs. Lincoln?”

Chapter 41

It took me a long time to stop blushing.

President Amanda Stonegate continued to look at me. I could see her regaining confidence, with a greater understanding of what she survived and then conquered growing up. In talking with her, I underestimated what it had done to her. I know it sounds unbelievable to underestimate the effect of repeated rapes over years in your own bed by the person who was supposed to protect you, but that is what I had done. I resolved then looking out the window of The White House to get a supervision session with The Oracle to figure that part out.

When I could feel the blood leaving my face, I said slowly, "I'm sorry, I didn't want to belittle what you have survived, indeed what you have conquered."

"Look, I survived it," she said, "but I don't think I conquered anything. "I still get angry easily, and while I can use that in fiery speeches, I know it's a problem."

I nodded. "What about relationships?" I asked.

"Do you mean with men?" she asked. I nodded again.

“I’ve had such a difficult time with relationships ever since college. Then, at U of M, all the guys seemed to want to get drunk, get me drunk, and drag me to a corner. “

She moved on to the next chapter of her life. “In law school, the jerk I allowed to do that was also doing it to my classmates,” she said, waving her head back and forth as she looked at the ground.

“What about Jim?” I asked.

She began to tear up.

“I don’t know,” she said, looking down. “I’ve been closer to him than to anybody in my life, but we have a lot of problems.”

I continued to look at her.

“He’s not perfect, that’s for sure. I know he’s kept a few girlfriends here and there over the years. But, it’s always been hard for me to blame him for that. I haven’t been the most available to him emotionally,” she paused for a moment, and then said, “Or sexually.” I only nodded, and she looked down at the rug, and then back to me. “You know, we both have been busy. I’ve been gallivanting to the state capitol, or on this campaign, and he’s been busy with his ranch and friends in Montana,” she said rather quickly.

“Do you love him?” I asked slowly.

“I think I did. I just don’t know any more,” she said.

“Does he love you?” I asked again.

“He says he does,” she said, looking directly at me.

“Do you believe him?” I asked with a blank face.

“I just don’t know,” she said. “I don’t even know if I want him to.”

“Why is that?” I asked with a bit more energy.

The President was quiet for some time. “I don’t know if I just lie down and accept him if he’ll hurt me. I know it’s silly, but I also wonder if it somehow will make me weaker.” She looked at me with her eyes open wide now.

“I noted that you said, ‘lie down and accept him,’” I said to those brown eyes.

She scoffed at me, and said shaking her head, “Everything is sexual for you psychiatrists, isn’t it?”

I smiled back at her, but couldn’t resist taking a look at her figure. “No, not everything, but it’s hard to talk about a marital relationship without bringing up the subject,” I said, and then added, “Aside from that, how was the play, Mrs. Stonegate?”

Her eyes flared, and she shouted at me, “You are the worst piece of scum I have ever met! It is all sex with you. Do you have any idea who you are talking to?”

I waited for a few moments, and the fire in her eyes seem to dim a bit. She looked down, and then back at me with anger. “Yes, Madam President. I know that you grew up on a rural ranch with no one to protect you, and that you were repeatedly raped by your father growing up.”

I continued, trying to sound authoritative, “Men tried to continue to take advantage of you for years after that. And then, you fought back against Axis Oil, against spendthrifts in the state assembly, and against anyone who would threaten this country,” I said evenly.

“And that includes the terrorists who killed- -your wife,” she yelled, pointing her finger at me, underscoring the last two words.

“Yes, that’s true,” I said, but I could feel the tears welling up in my eyes as well no matter how hard I tried to stop them.

I was quiet for a long time, and I looked away.

Amanda Stonegate slowed her breathing, and then looked at me, and then the tears. She came walking over to me, and took my hand. “Look,” she said, “I’m so sorry; I didn’t mean to say that.”

“Yes, you did, and you’re absolutely right,” I said through my tears. “Look, your job is to fight back against those who attack this country, or who killed my wife. Your job is to fight against the spendthrifts in congress or the state assembly. Your job is to steer this ship of state, to lead.”

Amanda Stonegate was starting to calm down, but was looking at me with a quizzical air.

“Look, my point is,” I said, “that your experiences made you a good fighter; that it contributed to who you are. I think you were able to not only survive, but show great resilience and use that experience, that energy, to fight back, and fight to The White House. But, I also think there is more to your ability to lead than your ability to fight.”

“But, I shouldn’t have brought up your wife,” she said, now looking at me.

“Remember the rules of us meeting in therapy. You can, and should say what you think. It is my job to get my point across better,” I said, and paused for a moment. “And, it’s my job not to cry in front of a patient,” I added, looking down.

“Aside from that, how did you like the session, Dr. West,” she said with a smile, with those brown eyes boring in at me.

“I think we’re getting somewhere. It is important for us to meet next week, even briefly. I’ll try to do a better job,” I said.

“I’ll plan to attack you some more,” she said.

“It’s a date,” I added.

Chapter 42

Thankfully, The Oracle could see me on Monday afternoon. I drove there with more trepidation than usual. I was so distracted, the road sign predicting my journey passed by without my notice as did the rest of the traffic on that busy Monday, and I pulled into a parking space in front of his building.

I walked into his waiting room, and was immediately met by the accusatory eyes of those African figures with the big heads situated on his coffee table. “Sorry,” I said out loud to them. They simply stared back at me. The old furniture and the same prints were on the wall in a confused way. But I remained worried.

I knew I made some errors in the last session with the President, and I wasn't totally sure what they were. But what was more worrisome to me was- I was having trouble not thinking of her. Usually, my reverie was filled with questions about the session, and whether my comments were too quick, too rude, and too loud. But, sometimes, all I thought about was the way she looked. She was a beauty queen after all, and I suppose that could be natural, but I felt too preoccupied by that. The wood figures in front of me just stared at me, and I felt guilty.

The familiar presence appeared at the door said, "Andy," and motioned for me to come into his office. First one door, and then the next door closed, and he sat down in his comfortable chair. I was distinctly uncomfortable.

After a moment, I looked at him, and the same blank look was on his face. He pursed his lips and those grey whiskers pointed at me. "Thank you for seeing me at such short notice," I said. "I have a high profile client, and I'm not sure I'm doing everything right." He nodded.

“She’s a high level executive, and came to me because of an anger problem. It turns out she has good reason to be angry since she was molested by her father as a child,” I said. The Oracle nodded. “After a few sessions,” I continued, “she was able to tell me about the abuse, and she is bright enough to know it affects her current behavior, but we haven’t gotten to the point yet to talk about how much of a presence the memories of the abuse are in her life and in her relationships. The last session we had, I think I may have prodded her too much, and she got pretty angry at me.”

The Oracle nodded again.

I waited for a moment to collect my thoughts. “I’m not sure I’m handling things right,” I added.

The Oracle asked a couple of questions, and I told him she was middle aged, and separated. At the last comment, he tilted his head back a bit. “How many times have you seen her?” he asked.

“I think about five or six times,” I said.

He nodded quickly. “Do you understand the reason for the explosion of anger?” The Oracle asked.

“Not totally,” I said. “In the session, I used a metaphor she used earlier in the session to force her to consider the abuse, and she blew up,” I added.

“Force her?” The Oracle asked.

“Well, I was insistent,” I said.

Now, The Oracle simply spread his hands apart as if he were a wide receiver, and said, “And, what do you think?”

I was obviously missing something. I tried to remember back to the session, and remembered the play metaphor, and the painting of Lincoln on the wall. That image was hard to forget sitting there in The White House. Other images from the session and The White House flooded my mind.

After a minute or two, The Oracle said, “What is your relationship with her like?” I blushed.

The Oracle raised his eyebrows. “Well, what is your relationship like with her?” he asked again.

“I think it’s pretty good. She’s been fairly open, and I think we are making progress even though we’ve only met about six times or so. Even with the blow up, she’s agreed to continue meeting,” I said.

The Oracle stared at me, and shook his head. “Andy, how long have you been an administrator?” he asked. Again, he spread his hands out.

“What do you mean?” was all I could come up with.

He shook his head again, and leaned toward me, shaking his head. “Andy, this is third year resident stuff..” Finally, The Oracle said, “Andy, come on, what usually happens at about the fifth or sixth session?”

Then, it dawned on me. “Oh, my... Now I know what you’re talking about,” I said with some embarrassment. It occurred to me that one of the keys in a therapy is developing a trusting relationship. If that occurs, after several sessions, the patient feels freer to express themselves more openly. Feelings emerge and are expressed. The therapist, if he or she is doing their job correctly, allows and encourages these feelings, and feelings are often assigned to the therapist from the subject matter of the therapy.

The patient treats the therapist like an important person in their life, usually from the past. This whole process is called transference. This is especially important because it enables the patient to work through the difficult feelings with an understanding, impartial observer. Analysts feel this is the crux of any psychotherapy.

“My god, I didn’t recognize the transference. We talked about the abuse from her father in the previous session, and continued to digest it, and she became angry when we discussed it again,” I said.

“But, you didn’t just discuss it,” The Oracle said. I looked on with a questioning look on my face.

“You said you ‘forced her’ to do it,” The Oracle said and looked at me.

“I guess that pushed the envelope a bit on remembering or reenacting the abuse, or at least her feelings about it,” I said.

The Oracle nodded.

I looked down. The Oracle said, “That’s not bad. You can use the transference in the next few sessions to allow her to work through the anger, or at least to understand it.” I nodded, appreciating the insight.

We were both silent for a few minutes.

The Oracle stared at me, and then asked, “Andy, you’re a good psychiatrist. This is relatively simple stuff. Why didn’t this occur to you?” I felt like I had been hit by lightning. The Oracle continued to look at me, just like his African figures did in the waiting room.

I simply sat there in that uncomfortable chair, with my mouth open. The drapes were still there in the corner, blocking the sunlight.

The Oracle continued to look at me. “Andy, what is your relationship with her like,” he asked yet again. I looked down and nodded.

“I think it’s good. I think she trusts me,” I said. The Oracle didn’t nod this time. He kept staring at me.

“What is she like?” The Oracle asked.

“Well, she’s bright, articulate, and ... well, she’s very attractive,” I said. The Oracle let half a smile come across his lips.

“Right,” he said.

I looked back at him, feeling embarrassed and not quite knowing what to say.

“What do you feel towards her?” The Oracle asked.

“I respect her abilities. She’s very able, and quite a fighter, and she is attractive, and I notice that.”

The Oracle nodded again. “Andy, how are you doing?” The Oracle asked.

“I think I’m doing OK,” I said. “I mean, I miss Terese, and think of her all the time. But, I’m not having dreams about her any more. I still find myself talking to her when I’m alone,” I added.

The Oracle nodded yet again. “Are you lonely?” he asked.

“Of course,” I said quickly.

He nodded again. “Be careful,” The Oracle said.

I furrowed my brow, and looked at him as though my face were a big questions mark. “Andy, this is more stuff that should be obvious to you. You’re not allowing yourself to think it, or to feel it,” he said.

I thought back to Amanda Stonegate. She did have an amazing figure, and those brown eyes were entrancing, and she was so quick, and ...

“Oh,” I said out loud.

“Andy,” The Oracle continued, “I know you’ve lost your wife. I know you’re lonely. And, I know that you have an attractive client with relationship and sex issues. Be careful. Be careful you don’t get emotionally involved with her, and of course, never get physically or sexually involved with a client,” he said.

“I know the old adage. Never have sex with a patient. You’ll only disappoint them,” I said.

The Oracle smiled, “But more than that, not recognizing your own feelings and avoiding dealing with them can blind you and can prevent you from recognizing things in therapy,” he said.

“Like the transference,” I said.

He nodded, "Like the transference," he said. "It's OK to recognize that someone is attractive, and of course, it's natural to be attracted to them, but use this information to assist you in the therapeutic relationship," he said.

I nodded, with more understanding.

"And, Andy, I think you may be more lonely than you let on," The Oracle said with a bit more compassion. I nodded, and a tear slowly drifted down my cheek.

Then, tears drifted down both cheeks. After a moment, I reached for his box of tissues. "Damn, I hate it when you do that to me," I said.

The Oracle smiled, and then nodded. "You see, transference yet again," he said.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know. But, you are a whole lot more understanding than my father was," I said.

"It's the business I'm in," The Oracle replied with a smile. "But, remember to take care of yourself," he said.

I nodded, and threw the tissue away.

The Oracle got up from his comfortable chair. I followed him as he crossed the room, not really wanting to get up. He opened one door, and then the other door.

I rose slowly from the chair, and looked out the window. I left the room, and passed the print of Monet's water lilies. I smiled at the colors, looked back at The Oracle, and said, "Thanks." He only closed his eyes and nodded yet again.

Chapter 43

The next day after work, I made it a point to get some exercise. I was so out of shape it was pitiful, but the first thing to do was a walk around the neighborhood on that Tuesday evening. Leaving the house, I saw the tree guarding the driveway. That one branch was still broken and empty. I looked up, and the other branch sheltering the yard was just beginning to bud, and I supposed that spring wasn't too far around the corner.

I brought a radio along for companionship, and through my ear buds, listened to the news programming. Foreign policy problems confronting the Stonegate Administration focused the program for the hour, and I listened to the "experts" discuss the subject.

"Reportedly, there is growing evidence that terrorist groups such as 'The Quest' are obtaining asylum and support in Syria. Sources high in the administration tell me that all options are being considered, including an invasion to root out and destroy the terrorist camps. The invasion would likely be met with fierce opposition, given the anti American crowds we have witnessed over the last weeks," one commentator said.

The other commentator said, “Still, America has been attacked, and President Stonegate made it clear during her campaign that, in her words, ‘We are not going to lie down and take it.’”

I cringed. Hearing the phrase “lie down and take it” had an obvious meaning to me, and I realized that I may be the only person in the world who knew that obvious meaning. I felt that I needed to call someone to say that The President’s initial reflex would be to attack anyone or anything she felt may be threatening her. I wanted to call the news anchor, to call John Sturgis, to call The President of the United States. But, I knew that I could do none of those things. I needed to work with my patient in therapy, and I needed to continue to respect the confidentiality that was at the basis of our interactions. Still, I wanted to scream.

I knew very personally what the consequences of terrorism were to the country, but I also knew attack was the reflex the President knew best, and used since she was a teen. She had attacked the men and injustice of Axis Oil, attacked the state budget in Montana, and in her presidential campaign had attacked Mooring effectively about the need to confront terrorists. My pace quickened on my walk.

“Our next guest is Frank Asbury, a high administration official, who is joining us by phone this evening from Washington,” was the phrase that pulled my attention back to the radio.

“Good day,” Frank said in a serious voice. “It is clear,” he said. “America was attacked, and another nation is harboring the terrorists. We have a clear choice whether we are going to accept the attack, or fight back to defend America.”

The commentator then asked, “Is America’s fight with the terrorists, or with Syria?”

Frank responded, “America has a fight with anyone who attacks our homeland, and with anyone who may side with the people who attack us. This country is tired of bearing the brunt of attacks by those who single us out because of the freedom we enjoy. We have a clear choice to lie down and accept it, or to root out those who attack us.”

I cringed yet again.

When asked if an invasion of the country was being considered, Asbury replied, “All options continue to be on the table.”

The commentator thanked Frank for his wise insights, and then began to discuss the consequences of an invasion of Syria.

The loss of American life would be significant, they felt, and crawling through the Syrian towns, especially Damascus would likely result in significant American casualties. The damage to American credibility in the region would take another hit. But still, another commentator commented, America had indeed been attacked, and our citizens were murdered in the process. Finally, the commentator said with a chuckle, "That doctor in Philadelphia may be able to forgive, but I doubt that many in the administration feel the same way."

I wanted to throw my radio across the street, but could only shake my head as I waved to a neighbor who saw me as she swept her sidewalk.

"Next on our program is the Syrian ambassador to the United States, Ali Urain, who also joins us by phone from Washington," the commentator said.

"Good evening, Ambassador Urain. It appears that the Stonegate administration is quite concerned about the presence of terrorist groups in your country, and they are debating an appropriate response," he said.

Urain replied with a rather formal tone, "Yes, and we in Syria are of course also concerned about the presence of those who do not respect international law."

Urain paused, and then added, “Many of the people in these groups are from other nations in the region, and do not represent the feelings of all the people in Syria.”

“But surely, you can understand the worries from the Stonegate administration. America was attacked. Its citizens were murdered. Clearly justice dictates a response. Those responsible should be brought to justice,” the commentator said.

Urain replied, “Yes, those responsible should be brought to justice, but surely no one can hold the entire population of Syria responsible for the actions of a few.”

“We have seen the demonstrations in the street, even those led by President Hameen. And, it seems clear that many in your country support the terrorists, and feel clear animosity toward the United States,” the commentator said, continuing to issue statements rather than questions.

“Yes, there are many views on many issues in our country, just as in yours. The President does address the public in gatherings just as in your country, and I assume that the discussion of issues and sometimes spirited demonstrations will continue longer than both of us are alive, Sir,” Urain replied.

Finally, the commentator asked Urain, “What would be your response to a full invasion by American forces?”

“Of course, we hope that the United States will respect the sovereign borders of our country, and allow us to deal with our own outlaws,” he said.

“But so far, you haven’t dealt with them. Thank you for talking with us this evening,” the commentator said, cutting Urain off.

The program then switched gears and in literally a minute, other commentators entered a conversation just as spirited about the wonders of spring training, and which was a better place to play baseball in the spring – Florida or Arizona. I turned off my radio.

By this time, I was heading home and the sun was now lower in the sky. As I approached the house, my driveway held my Chevy, and the same broken tree was standing guard. I looked up, and the half of the tree toward the driveway still appeared lifeless, but the half toward the house was coming to life. I wondered which side would prevail over the months to come.

I walked around to the back of the house, and our garden was as lifeless as ever. I began talking to Terese as I still do sometimes. “Terese,” I said out loud to our garden, “what should we do to your murderers? Should we invade the entire country?”

Only emptiness greeted me in reply.

Chapter 44

On board the train to Washington that next Wednesday, I settled into my seat. I was now accustomed to the trip, and even some of the conductors recognized me and offered me a hello as they checked my ticket. As I opened my newspaper, the front pages were filled with speculation about Syria, and what should be the correct course of action. The biggest story was labeled “analysis” and surveying the other stories, it was remarkable how little news there was. Terrorists attacked the United States, and killed our citizens. We suspect they are hiding in Syria. Syria has not yet handed them over to the United States. There continue to be anti-American and anti-Israeli demonstrations in the big cities of Syria. That was the sum of the news. But, that did not stop the “analysis” and the editorials from flourishing.

I kept turning the pages of the paper, and at the end of the first section, at the top of the editorial page, there was an editorial entitled, “No forgiveness for Syria.” The first paragraph featured my now famous line, “I forgive you,” and they quoted me and labeled me a “Philadelphia Academic Psychiatrist” as if that would in some way link me to a group that was left wing, or foolish, or connected to some other interest in some mysterious way.

I had to smile because a good portion of the “Philadelphia Academic Psychiatrists” I knew were looking for work. The editorial continued for a solid two columns, calling for a full invasion of Syria, before ending with the words, “Forgiveness is a good personal religious stance, but bad public policy.”

Scouring the rest of the first section of the newspaper, I saw quotes from Vice President Smithson, and even one from Frank Asbury calling for more military action, but none from President Stonegate, or the Secretary of Defense. I knew that Frank was keeping an eye on me, and could only imagine who was keeping an eye on the rest of the administration. Smithson was named the Vice Presidential nominee so Stonegate could get the presidential nomination. I wondered what price must be exacted in return.

Sinking into reverie about attacks, I reflected on the loss of my wife, and the unbelievable continuing presence of my grief filled, angry rant in public policy discussions. I drifted into the rest of the paper. The sports pages held predictions for the Phillies as they entered spring training in Clearwater, Florida. There, the water may be clear, but the Phillies' chances were far from clear.

However, just as in the first section of the paper, the sports pages were filled with predictions and advice as well. I was comforted that no one in the Phillies organization talked about forgiveness.

By the time I arrived at Union Station in Washington, I was eager to get off the train, and venture to The White House. I got on the Metro, and by reflex, kept a careful eye on those who entered the same subway train with me. I tried to reassure myself that I was wasting my time by being so paranoid, but I reminded myself that the Presidency and a way was at risk.

Again, at the entrance to The White House, I was eager to see the security guard, and greeted him warmly. He seemed surprised, and said only, "Good morning, Dr. West," in a rather formal tone.

I had gathered my bag and coat from the security guard, and taken about five steps down the hall, when I met the impish smiling face of Frank Asbury. “Hey Doc, here to visit with your girl again?” he said.

I took two steps toward him, and then stopped. I said, “Mr. Asbury, my girl was murdered just before the election.” I took a step away from him, and then turned back and said, “Thanks for asking.” I could see Asbury’s jaw drop a bit as I turned and retreated into the men’s room.

Thankfully, I was able to make it through the door and leaned against the wall in disgust. I was sweating, and could feel my heart beating. I tried to gather myself in preparation for my session with The President. I sure didn’t know what the right public policy decision was, but I surely knew that guy should not have a hand in making it.

After a few minutes, I wandered down the hall to the waiting area, and this time met Mr. Anthony Moore, Asbury’s assistant, who only nodded at me. Clearly, they were following me closely. I never attracted this kind of attention before, even when I ran for congress. But, I guess I never had a patient who decided so much of the world’s affairs before either.

At exactly 12 noon, Sturgis appeared in the doorway and called for me. We were walking down the hall when, looking straight ahead, I said, “They’re keeping an eye on me.”

Sturgis only stared straight ahead as well and said, “Focus, make the play.”

We entered the elevator to The White House’s living quarters.

Chapter 45

The President was already sitting on the couch eating a salad when I arrived. The jacket from her business suit was thrown over the back of the couch, and she was dressed in a blouse and a skirt. When she leaned down to pick up a bit of salad that had dropped to the floor, I noted that her blouse could have been buttoned up a bit more. She smiled, and said, “Do you want something to eat, Doctor West?”

“No thank you,” was all I could utter as I stared into those deep brown eyes.

She then said, “Here, I got you something.” Amanda Stonegate handed over a playbill from a show currently playing at Ford’s Theater in Washington, the site of the assassination of President Lincoln.

“I didn’t see it, but I hear it’s a good play,” she said still smiling.

I laughed out loud. “Look,” I said, “I truly appreciate the gift, but you didn’t have to do that. Remember the rules. You should say what you think and show what you feel regardless of the context...or rather, especially because of the context. I will be here next week because I work for you,” I said.

The president nodded, and said, “I know, but I couldn’t help myself” she said with a glint in her eyes.

I laughed again.

“Look,” I said, “I think you have reason to be angry.”

“But, I shouldn’t be angry at you,” Amanda Stonegate said.

“Why not?” I asked.

“Well, you haven’t done anything to me,” The President said. I continued to look at her. A minute or two passed, and the silence grew between us.

Finally, she said, “I do have reason to be angry. My father repeatedly raped me. I was just a child,” and she began to cry softly. I could only nod in agreement.

“And, whose fault was it?” I pressed on.

“Well, his, of course,” Amanda said, and then after a minute she shook her head and slowly added, “But he did say, ‘You’re my special, pretty girl.’”

“Were you his special, pretty girl?” I asked.

She looked down, and said, “You know, I always thought so. I know this sounds strange, but while I was scared of him when I was a child, and then grew to be angry at him, and then to hate him, I suppose I always thought I was special to him,” she added.

“Special in what way?” I asked.

“I don’t know, really,” she said. “I mean I was his little girl,” she added. I again nodded. “It’s crazy, isn’t it? I guess I almost sound proud that he thought well of me,” Amanda Stonegate said looking away.

“Well, he was your father, and it’s natural to feel good about positive feelings he had for you,” I said.

“But he raped me. Again and again,” she said with questioning eyes.

“Yes. And, how do you understand that,” I asked The President. She shook her head over and over. Tears came and she wiped them away.

“I suppose that both are true. I mean I was his little girl, and I was special to him. And, he got drunk and raped me all those Saturday nights,” she said, and she shook her head again back and forth.

“You are absolutely correct,” I added, and she turned her gaze with those big brown and now sad eyes to me. “You were his little girl, and he should have cared for you, but instead, after getting drunk, he abused you all those years. You see, he probably did care for you, but certainly, he was a very flawed man,” I added.

This time, The President nodded.

“What about your mother?” I asked.

“She’s always been an enigma to me. I mean, she was a sweet lady, and most people in town liked her,” she said.

“What did you think of her?” I asked.

Amanda Stonegate looked down at the floor, and said, "I don't know. I mean what does anyone think of their own mother. While growing up, I thought she was nice, and cared for us. But then,..." Amanda looked away for a moment. "But then, when I told her about my father, I was so very disappointed in her. It hurt so badly... I felt so alone. I mean she should have done something, something to help me," she said looking directly at me.

"Yes, she should have protected you," I said. "Why do you think she didn't do anything to protect you?" I asked next.

Amanda Stonegate shook her head again and added, "That's a tough one. When I was a child, my first instinct was to do what she told me."

"And, you did," I said.

"Yes, screwy as it sounds, that's exactly what I did," Amanda replied. "But then, I got mad at her too for not doing something to help me." I could see her grit her teeth and she wondered what to say next.

"I mean, here I was -- a kid, getting raped by her father, and she does nothing; and then, sleeping with a knife for years for protection when I was a teenager..." Stonegate's voice faded away. She was silent for a moment, and then added, "I mean, she certainly didn't do enough."

I again nodded. "Are you angry at her too?" I asked.

"I suppose I am," The President said. She again shook her head, and waited for a moment. "I guess I'm angry at a lot of people," she said with a smile.

Again, I nodded without a smile. "You certainly have good reason to be angry at both your father and your mother," I said. I waited for a moment, and added, "And then, after years...years continuing from when you were very little, it became a habit."

"But there have been plenty of other people along the way I should be angry at," she said.

"Like all those drunk men at the University of Montana on Saturday nights," I said.

"You betcha," Amanda Stonegate added with some gusto.

She looked down, and added, "And that jerk professor in law school," she said.

"Yes," I added.

"And Jim?" I asked.

She looked at me. She sat back in her chair, and her forgotten salad fell to the floor. Amanda Stonegate looked away for a full minute or two, and as I watched those deep eyes, I could see anger, and then sentiment, and then, finally, a tear drop down her face. “Boy, that’s complicated,” she said. I again nodded.

“At first, he was so cute, so big, so strong,” she said, looking into the distance.

“Could he ride the bronco?” I asked.

Amanda smiled, “At first, but then he fell off.”

I looked at her and added, “You told me that after he did fall off in that rodeo in Cody, Wyoming, that you were surprised at how you felt.”

Amanda Stonegate nodded, and said, “Yes, I was surprised. I mean, I thought he was this cute guy, and he was nice enough, but then when he was hurt, I literally ran to his side.”

“So, there’s more there than him being cute,” I added.

She looked at me with some irritation. “Well, of course. We got married. I mean he is a strong guy, and a good person.”

“He is a strong guy,” I added. “Did he protect you?”

“Protect me?” she said with some surprise. “No he never protected me. I mean by then I could take care of myself,” she said looking at me with some surprise.

“And take care of the state budget, a national campaign, and now the federal government,” I added.

“Yes, I suppose so,” she said with a questioning look on her face.

“Do you love him?” I asked.

She looked away for a while, and then said, “I did, and then I was so mad at him, and now, I don’t know.”

“Tell me about that,” I said.

She exhaled a long breath. “Well, when we were first dating, I suppose it was just his looks at first that attracted me, and I did know that he was a nice guy. I mean, I always felt, well, safe with him,” Stonegate said.

“Safe?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said, looking down, “I knew that he was different than the other guys I had dated. You know, he was a good guy, and was interested in me.”

“Yes, safe,” I said.

“No, you dirty shrink, it was more than that. It was more than the fact that he didn’t try to rape me. I loved him,” she said raising her voice.

“Oh,” I said, looking into those brown eyes flaring at me. “You fell in love with him,” I added and then paused. “So what happened?”

The President looked away into a corner of the room, and I could see the memories flash by in her eyes. “I suppose we were an odd couple in a way. I mean I was this ambitious woman who went to law school, and he never went to college. He worked around the ranch, and I was trying to work with all those papers and forms in my law office.”

“So what happened,” I asked again.

“We both fell in love. I think we both surprised each other,” she said. “He certainly had the eye of most of the single women in town, when I was trying to figure out what it was to be a lawyer, but we connected.”

“Was it magic?” I asked.

Amanda Stonegate frowned at me. “No, not at first. At first, it was just nice, and safe. But then as time went on, I began to see that he really was a good, strong man,” she said.

“What did he think of you,” I asked.

Amanda Stonegate laughed again. “At first, I think he was intimidated, and this coming from a guy who rides bulls for a living,” she laughed.

“I remember after we were dating for about six months, we were walking along a street in Havre, and he looked down at me, and said, ‘Amanda, I’ve decided something about you. You’re not that smart,’ he said.” She continued, “I wheeled around and punched him in the arm, but he just smiled down at me. We stopped walking, and I remember exactly where we were– it was by the Dairy Queen on Main Street. We stopped walking, and he was smiling, and looked down at me and said. ‘Amanda, you’re not that smart. Here you are, the prettiest girl in town, with a college education, and a law degree, and your own law practice. People in town come to you for advice, and you’re still thinkin’ for some godforsaken reason that you have to prove something to somebody, Lord knows who.’” Amanda smiled sitting there on the couch, with her salad half on her lap, and half on the floor. “We hugged and kissed right there in front of the Dairy Queen,” she said.

I smiled back at her. “So what happened?” I asked again.

“We got married,” Amanda said. She then looked away, and said, “And then the Axis Oil suit came up. I didn’t know exactly what I was doing in the court room, but they sure needed to be attacked,” she said, smiling impishly at me.

I nodded again.

“But, the lawsuit dragged on, and it took more and more of my time,” Stonegate said. “I was so concerned with my practice, and with the lawsuit, that I guess we drifted away from each other a bit.” She looked down. “No, to be accurate, I guess I drifted away a bit,” she said. “You see, Jim continued to chase me. And, every spare moment I had we spent together. It’s just that those spare moments became more and more infrequent. Jim also was disappointed that I couldn’t have kids,” she said, and looked down again. Amanda Stonegate looked up at me with those sad eyes. Jim became more and more disappointed that we couldn’t be together, and repeatedly told me, ‘I’m thinking of working for Axis Oil. At least then, you’ll pay attention to me.’”

Stonegate continued, “The lawsuit dragged on. It lasted for about two years, which I know now is not long for a lawsuit of that kind, but it certainly took its toll on me, and then our relationship. Jim finally moved out, saying he had enough.”

I remained silent, and just looked at that auburn hair shading those brown eyes.

“When we were separated, Jim had an affair with a girl in town,” she said, and sat back on the sofa, and lifted her head to the ceiling. “She became pregnant, and gave birth to a little girl. Jim stood by her at first, but he was confused. Finally, he told me that he didn’t want to divorce me, that he loved me, but that he would have to support the child. He didn’t really love her mother, he said. She was a younger woman in town, and they became connected when we were separated. The girl got married later somebody else in town, and the baby now is in college. Jim is paying for that,” she felt she had to add.

“I’m surprised the media hasn’t descended on that poor girl,” I said.

“Well, her mother really is a good person, in a good marriage, and they don’t want it to blow up. And not many people know, except for them, us, and now you,” she said, looking directly at me.

“I will continue to follow the rules, of course,” I said. I let a moment pass, and Stonegate stopped staring at me.

“So how has your marriage been?” I asked.

Amanda looked down and then up at me. “It’s been ... complicated,” she said. “I love him, and I love my work. He loves me, and he loves his daughter, and he sees her periodically still.”

“That’s part of the reason he’s still in Havre,” The President said.

“What’s the rest of the reason?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I mean I’ve been busy,” she said, motioning to the paintings of former Presidents on the wall of The White House. “And, I guess it’s been habit. I do love him, and when we’re together there are times when we could still be in front of that Dairy Queen. But there are other times, when...” and Amanda drifted off.

“When what,” I asked. “...when he says that he can’t get my attention,” she added.

“I mean first with the state legislature, and then the governor’s seat in Helena, and then the Presidential race, and now with all of this, it’s been hard,” Amanda said looking at me.

“Did you ever use your job, and being busy to... protect yourself?” I asked.

“Protect myself from what?” President Stonegate looked at me in surprise.

I was silent for several moments, and she looked down, and then back at me quizzically. “Did you ever run to your work to protect yourself from getting too close to that man?” I asked.

“Don’t be silly,” she said quickly. “I love my work, and it’s important, and I’ve been good at it,” she added, and looked at me. I simply looked back at her for a time. “Are you suggesting that I deliberately spent extra time at my jobs to avoid spending time with him?” she asked.

“You mean to avoid getting too close to that man?” I asked.

“I am close to him,” she said.

I nodded.

She looked at the floor and then at the walls filled with paintings of famous Americans. “My job has always been important to me. There is much left to be done. There are important things to accomplish, people who need to be protected,” The President of the United States added.

“I know,” I said.

“What does that mean?” she asked with growing anger.

“There is much to be done, and I know that it is now, and has been your job in public life to advance those goals. Your job has been important...and seductive to you,” I said.

“What do you mean, seductive?” Amanda Stonegate said to me rather loudly.

“You fought back against a lot of things, against a lot of people,” I said.

“They deserved it,” Stonegate added quickly.

“Yes, they did, and you are good at it,” I said.

“So, what’s the problem?” she asked.

“Work is not a problem. As America knows, you’re good at it, and certainly there is no shortage of villains and bad things to attack,” I said calmly.

“So?” The President of The United States added.

“What does attacking all these things do?” I asked.

She dropped her mouth and stared at me. “It makes things right, of course,” she said quickly.

I raised my eyebrows. She stared at me, and then looked down. I continued to look at her, and willed myself not to say anything. Amanda looked down, and brushed the salad pieces off her lap.

“Look, there are bad things and bad people that need to be put right,” she said.

“And, you’ve gotten into a habit of fighting back against bad things and people who do bad things,” I added.

“You shrinks!” she called out. “Don’t be silly. I’m not President to fight back against my father. He’s dead.”

“No. You’re President because you won the election. You’re smart, creative, and a leader,” I added.

“At least 49% of America thinks so,” she said with a smile.

“Yes, but hold back the charm for just a moment,” I added. “Along the way, you got into habits. You developed habits of fighting back. You repeatedly say that you and America should ‘not lie down and take it’. You don’t. You fight back. You’ve also gotten into the habit of using your verbal and leadership skills you developed in school, and honed in Helena. They’re not separate things. They’re all you,” I said, and stopped for a moment.

She shrugged her shoulders, and turned her head a bit, and the President looked at me.

“You see, all of this is you. You’re the girl who was attacked and raped. You’re the girl who fought back. You’re the smart, pretty one. You’re the girl who is the beauty queen. You’re the girl who outsmarted a multinational company. You’re the girl who became governor. You’re the girl who became President. They’re all you,” I said.

“I must be quite a girl,” she said with only half a smile.

“Yes, you are,” I agreed. “You see, all of that, all of the bad things, and all of the experiences contributed to make you who you are.”

Amanda Stonegate looked down at the floor, and then straight at me. I continued, "You have been strong enough and resilient enough to make that abused girl in Havre -- The President of The United States," I finally said.

She nodded, and then said, "It's not that simple, though".

"I agree," I added. "We still have to figure some of this out," I said looking at her.

"You mean the play has more than one act?" she asked impishly.

"Yup," I said. I let several more moments pass.

"So what about your work, your job," I said. "Do you hide in it?"

"How can anybody hide in this place?" she asked, looking at the walls of The White House.

"Good point," I smiled. "What I meant was...sometimes do the demands of your work give you an excuse not to reach out to Jim?" I asked.

She looked down for a time, and then looked up at me. "My work is, and has been both difficult and rewarding. It is exciting to have crowds of people gather to listen to what you have to say. That is intoxicating," The President said.

"And, you are good at it," I added.

“Is it easier sometimes to talk to a crowd of thousands than to talk to that one guy?” I asked.

“Sometimes, it is,” she said.

I nodded.

“So, what should I do? We’ve been in this dance for a long time. He’s had his affairs, and I’ve been - - seduced-- in your words—by politics,” she said, throwing her hands up into the air.

“I don’t know,” I said. “What did Jim do when he was thrown by that bull?” I added.

“He writhed on the ground in pain,” she said quickly.

“And then, you ran to his side, surprised by your feelings,” I added just as quickly.

She shook her head. “This ain’t bronco riding,” she said with a smile.

“No, bronco riding is easier, and hurts less,” I said slowly.

Amanda Stonegate looked away, out the window for a time. She looked out the window at the past, and at her present. She then looked back at me, and exhaled slowly.

“So, do you forgive him?” I asked.

Amanda Stonegate was quiet for a moment, and then slowly said, “I’ll forgive him if he forgives me.”

“Maybe for your next sleepover, you should invite him for a Saturday night,” I smiled at her.

She looked at the wall, and then at me, and smiled.
“Maybe,” she said.

Chapter 46

I looked at my watch, and saw we only had fifteen minutes left. “I know our time is limited, but it’s important that I ask you a few more things,” I said.

“That’s ok, at one o’clock, I’m meeting with some members of congress, and those guys can wait,” The Commander In Chief said with a smile.

“Let me ask you about your dad,” I said. The smile quickly left her face.

“Do you forgive him?” I asked. “No, I don’t. He raped me. He abused me. He should have protected me,” she said shaking her head back and forth.

“Well let me ask a few things,” I continued. “Whose fault was the abuse?”

“It was his, of course,” Stonegate said with some anger.

“And how about that law professor?” I asked.

“He was a class one jerk,” she said with her brown eyes growing bigger.

“And how about Axis Oil?” I asked. “Those people just cared about profits, and didn’t care who they stepped on in the mean time, and cared less about the Indians and the Indian lands. They were awful people,” she added.

“And how about those members of Congress who want to raise taxes to pay for expanded medicare benefits?” I asked.

“No new taxes from those people,” she said with a smile.

“It was worth a try,” I said.

“And how about invading Syria?” I asked. She stopped and looked at me quizzically. She then dropped her hands to her side, sat up straight, and after a pause said, “I can’t talk to you about that. What does that have to do with my personal life?”

“Good question,” I said and continued. “Growing up, your father raped you and abused you. You were angry at him, and you fought back. Your mother didn’t protect you, and you learned you had to fight back on your own. Over years you learned this, again and again. Then, at the University of Montana, you fought back against those drunken undergraduates on Saturday night. Then, in law school, you were hurt again by that law professor. Then you fought back and attacked Axis Oil, and then the state budget and then attacked the Presidential race, and in a few minutes from now, congress.”

“Your point?” Stonegate said, with those brown eyes flaring a bit.

“Let me ask a few more things,” I said.

“Do you need to attack Jim?” I asked.

“Well, no... but sometimes it slips out,” she said, thoughtfully. “Right,” I said, “Do you understand why?”

“I suppose it’s become somewhat of a habit,” she said.

I nodded, and looked at her.

She looked down, then at the wall, and then at me. “That’s the most important thing to learn out of all of this,” I added. “You see, over time, people learn to expect things a certain way and react accordingly. You’re a strong, smart, woman. You’ve gotten very good at attacking things, and making Axis Oil pay, or attacking the state budget and protecting the taxpayers. But, it also has become a habit. It’s important to know that. Habits serve you well sometimes, but not at other times. Not everybody, such as Jim, deserves to be attacked. Sometimes, there are other ways to manage situations besides old habits,” I concluded, looking at her.

“So you mean I shouldn’t yell at you,” Amanda Stonegate said.

“You can yell at me, if you want, I’ll still be here—remember that’s our deal. But, not everybody should be attacked,” I said.

“Are you telling me that my unconscious will make me kick a dog, yell at congress, attack Syria?” The President asked with growing anger.

“No, not at all. It’s not that simple. You see, you run your life, not your unconscious. But, you still have to manage those impulses, and decide what’s the best way to manage things,” I said. “What you do with the dog, or with congress, or with Syria,” I said, and then paused, “Or with Jim, are all good questions. Just don’t give a snap answer,” I told her.

“No, I won’t snap,” The President of The United States said to me.

I smiled at those brown eyes, and nodded.

“Oh, and before you yell at congress, I have one more thing I have to tell you,” I said. I paused, and wasn’t sure what to say about my paranoia and the Vice President’s men. But, I felt I had to tell her. I cleared my throat and said, “Frank Asbury continues to take a special interest in our meetings. He greeted me at the security door to The White House today,” I said.

“Yup, those guys are inquisitive,” The President said, with absolutely no surprise in her voice.

Of all the things we had talked about today that was not a surprise to her, or seemingly even a concern. It did take a lot to rattle this woman.

I looked down at my watch, and I knew that I had taken more than our allotted time.

“Well,” she said looking down at her stained skirt with salad dressing on it. “I have to change.”

I smiled.

Chapter 47

Back at home in Philadelphia, spring was definitely on its way. I often peered at the tree guarding our driveway, and half of the tree sprouted buds and it was coming to life as spring approached. The grass was starting to grow, and in my visits to the garden where I still talked to Terese, some plants were beginning to push their way through the earth. The Phillies were in Clearwater, and going through the motions of preparing for the season.

The house was still quiet, but I wasn't surprised anymore by that as I arrived home after work. But, every now and then I saw a woman who reminded me of Terese on the street, and those sightings now were sometimes met with a smile. The pictures of Terese still guarded the bedroom dresser, and the shelves on top of the TV. I'm not sure I was moving on, but I was at least moving, and I was grateful for that. Winston Churchill said, "If you're going through hell, keep going." I was trying to do exactly that.

Philadelphia State was still a mess, which only meant no one noticed when I took off for Washington each Wednesday. The bean counters were happy to have another grant, no matter how small to put on their tallies, and at work, people in general ignored me. That was fine with me.

I saw Barbara periodically, and she to no one's surprise was transforming the pediatric outpatient clinics. Of course, sick poor children don't have money either, and the accountants of the medical school were sniffing around there as well. She ignored them.

The next Wednesday rolled around, and after surveying the predictions about the Phillies pitching, I surveyed the predictions for America's foreign policy in the front section as I rode on the train to Washington. The sports pages had more data than the front pages.

News analyses again described the quandary America faced in Syria. Again, it seemed clear, although there was no way to be sure that the small terrorist group, "The Quest" who had murdered Terese and others en route to New York months ago still sheltered somewhere in the desert. And, again, Vice President Smithson was quoted as saying, "America has a duty to defend itself from its enemies. Those who shelter terrorists deserve no protection."

Later in the article, a "source high in the administration" stated that "a full scale invasion of Syria was being contemplated by both The United States and Israel."

The hawkish Stonegate was not quoted, except from her earlier comment in a speech two weeks ago that “all options are on the table and are being considered.” The news analysts were in agreement, though, that the President who built her political career on a strong national defense would likely be aggressive in dealing with this threat, and would likely favor an invasion. The military was preparing for this, other unnamed sources stated. The thought of a full scale invasion sent a chill down my spine as I read the paper.

At this point, I knew the President and Commander In Chief probably as well as anyone on the planet. I wondered what course of action she would pursue. I truly did not know, but I knew her first impulse would be to attack, to strike back.

The train arrived at Union Station, and I followed the familiar steps past the shops to the metro station to my house call at The White House. The Security Guard at the front gate met me with a smile, and I waved back after he handed my credentials back to me. I shook hands with the secret service guard manning the metal detector to the White House as well. They were my defense, and I was grateful for them.

After leaving the hallway from the metal detectors, I stopped and looked in both directions, half expecting Frank Asbury to pop up out of the carpet or the walls. He was nowhere to be seen. I walked down to the waiting area, and expected to be met by his henchman, Mr. Anthony Moore. But, again, he was not visible either.

I took a seat in the waiting area, but my eyes were darting back and forth waiting for the confrontation from one of them. But, nothing happened. At ten of twelve, John Sturgis appeared in the hallway, looking a bit more disheveled than usual, if that was possible, and said, "Doc, we're a little busy around here today, and the President won't be able to meet with you. You have the afternoon off."

I only raised my eyebrows, and thanked him, and walked toward the security guards at the door. Again, there was no confrontation from the Vice President's men. I shook hands with the security guard at the door, commented on what a nice day it was, and left The White House.

My head was swimming with possibilities of why my meeting had been cancelled, and why the Vice President's men had other things to do besides tailing me, but I only knew that I had the afternoon off on a sunny day in Washington.

I decided to take a walk, and started in the direction of the Capitol building. Along the way, I continued to wonder why I was not met by Asbury or his crew, but was grateful for his absence and for the lack of a confrontation. My mind continued to wander on the way to the Capitol, with the increasing thought of how out of shape I was as I slowly climbed the steps to the visitor's entrance.

I joined a tour for the Capitol building, and when we entered Statuary Hall, I looked over to the statue of Jeanette Rankin, and my jaw dropped. I could have sworn Terese was standing in front of the statue, and I walked slowly over to the statue half expecting the woman to vanish in thin air, and half expecting her to turn and run to my arms. I stopped by the winged statue guarding the stairway, and continued to gawk at the woman in front of Jeanette Rankin's statue. Walking over to where Jeanette Rankin surveyed the Capitol building from her perch in the rotunda, the woman turned, and looked at me. She wasn't Terese, of course, but she was a pleasant looking, middle aged woman who could have been her sister.

"So, are you a fan of Jeanette Rankin?" I asked.

She looked at me strangely and said, "Who?"

I pointed to the statue, and said, “You know, Jeanette Rankin – here. She was the first woman in Congress, and a lifelong pacifist.”

The woman smiled and said, “Well, good for her, but I was just checking for messages on my phone.” She smiled pleasantly at me, and walked away. I followed her with my eyes as she walked across Statuary Hall, and then down the steps.

I was still sweating, and still blushing when I turned to the statue. “Jeanette, why did you do that to me?” I asked out loud. She simply looked forward, with her head held high; wearing that same simple dress that would be commonplace in any classroom. “It would be good if you could get off that pedestal, and help us out here,” I said. She continued to look forward, surveying the crowd of tourists in Statuary Hall.

I rubbed her left foot.

Chapter 48

The week passed, with the weather getting warmer, and more comfortable as each day passed. March may have come in like a lion, but as the adage predicted, it was leaving like a lamb. I went to the garden in the back of the house, and cleaned the debris accumulated over the winter. Leaves and twigs were discarded, and the shoots of new life exploded to the surface of the ground. I thought that it wouldn't be long now until buds and then flowers would arrive signaling the irrepressible growth of new life, and the advent of spring.

Going inside, I prepared my Tuesday evening dinner of frozen lasagna in the microwave. As I was sitting down at the table, the TV blared the warning of a "breaking news" announcement. "There have been events in Syria, and the President is going to address the nation in about fifteen minutes with an update." I dropped the lasagna to the table, and rushed over to the TV to turn up the volume.

"The administration leaked word that military events in Syria are unfolding quickly, and The President will give a prepared announcement in several minutes. We do not know exactly what happened, but word is that some kind of military action is underway," the anchor said.

The next fifteen minutes were filled with one reporter after another each saying that this was an important development in the war against terror, and United States policy toward the Middle East. Each added they did not know exactly what was going on, but we would have more information soon.

The lasagna cooled. Vice President Smithson and Frank Asbury were nowhere to be seen in the sound bytes, and were not featured next to any of the reporters' microphones as the minutes passed.

The anchor then said, "The President, I understand, will be giving us a brief update, but will not take questions from reporters."

The television then showed President Amanda Stonegate walking down the long red carpet approaching microphones at the entrance to the west wing of The White House. The announcer said, "And now, ladies and gentlemen, The President and Commander in Chief of The United States of America."

President Stonegate walked to the microphones with a brisk gait, and began to speak deliberately, but with the same determined face she showed during the campaign. She looked different than the woman discussing her rough childhood in Havre.

“My fellow Americans,” she said, “This morning, The United States launched a strike against terrorist bases in Syria. Acting on our own, a team of Navy Seals entered Syria, and attacked a terrorist base and training camp in the desert about thirty miles south of Damascus. There, because of the nature of the surprise attack, they were met with little opposition from the terrorist force of about thirty outlaws camped there. The commander and four leaders of “The Quest” terrorist organization were killed after a brief firefight. Twelve other terrorists were killed in the attack, and the Navy Seals arrested the remaining thirteen terrorists at the camp under international law, and brought them back onboard a US Navy aircraft carrier cruising in the eastern Mediterranean Sea. Two Navy Seals were injured in the attack, but they are doing well in the sick bay on board the aircraft carrier. Perhaps as importantly as eliminating the terrorist group “The Quest”, Navy Seal forces captured computer systems and phones which held important information concerning allies and supporters for this terrorist group. These are being systematically examined by our intelligence personnel.” The President, paused, and looked at the camera.

“Both the governments of Syria and Israel were notified of the attack after it was completed.” The government of Syria has protested the attack, and we will be talking with their representatives in the days to come. But, let it be known, to all the peoples of the world,” Stonegate said, now with her voice rising in volume, “That this government will respond forcibly and quickly to any threat, against our citizens or against our government, in any corner of the world. Those who murder our citizens will be dealt with swiftly. Anyone who supports those who seek to murder our citizens will face the same fate.”

“Finally,” she said, “My thanks, and the thanks of all Americans go out to the American Intelligence Community, who made the strike in the heart of Syria possible, and to the brave men and women of our military forces who brought those responsible for a brazen attack on our homeland to justice. Good evening to you, and God Bless The United States of America,” she ended, showing the famous face of determination that guided her through the campaign to The White House.

She then turned, and walked back down the red carpet leading to the interior of The White House.

I would be there tomorrow.

Chapter 49

On the train to Washington the next morning, I opened the paper with more eagerness. The front pages were filled with news and analysis of the raid in Syria. Apparently, the terrorist cell was taken by surprise, and not only were the terrorist group members captured, but a large number of their computers and cell phones were also captured which, the analysts guessed, would yield important information about the operations of the group as well as details about who were the political and financial supporters for this terrorist organization. Other arrests or raids were expected in the near future. There was general praise for the effectiveness of the raid, and for its execution by the Stonegate administration. A secret, small raid to capture and kill almost all members of the terrorist group, “The Quest” was not thought of as being one of the options “on the table”, but it had been planned and carried out both efficiently and effectively.

Other analysts praised the role of US intelligence services for identifying the location of the camp. The analysts were somewhat surprised since the US Intelligence services were thought to be largely ineffective in the second part of the previous administration. Other analysts heaped praise on President Amanda Stonegate for acting decisively.

Still others said that with the capture and elimination of this terrorist group, along with the information captured on the group's computers that a large scale invasion of Syria seemed much less likely.

On the train on the way to Washington, I read all of the news reports, and all of the "analyst" comments in the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, and the Philadelphia Inquirer. None mentioned Vice President Smithson, or "sources high in the administration". All had praise for President Stonegate and the execution of this mission.

International commentary on the mission however was not as uniform. The Israelis strongly praised the raid, saying that it brought murderers to justice, and strengthened the international community. Largely, our allies in Europe supported the move, but many of the Arab states said they were "evaluating the situation" and would be "in communication with Washington" about the subject.

The President of Syria strongly condemned the “invasion of Syrian territory by American military forces” and “decried the clear breach of international law with the invasion of our sovereign territory.” He said that the Syrian government was planning a protest to the United Nations, and would convey protests to the American government through diplomatic channels.

The Syrians, President Hameen said, “are a peaceful people and condemn this outrageous attack on our soil.”

Exiting Union Station in Washington, I took the metro to the station closest to The White House. As I arrived closer to The White House, I was a bit surprised at my own reaction to the news. I knew that I should be happy that those responsible for Terese’s murder had been killed or brought to justice, but I didn’t feel any special personal connection to this news event. Maybe I had moved on. Maybe I had forgiven, I thought.

But, I was grateful that full scale war had been averted, at least for now, in the Middle East.

I entered The White House gates, and once again greeted the security guards who checked my bag and my coat. After crossing the metal detector, I again thanked the secret service agents who gave me a cheery “Good morning, Doc,” as I passed.

As I entered The White House, I looked right and left, but again did not see Frank Asbury or his man, Anthony Moore. Cautiously, I entered the hallway, but instead as I entered the hall, I ran into Jim Doyle, The President's husband. He was walking with a young attractive woman, about twenty years old, and he seemed in good spirits. He seemed to recognize me as I approached.

"Hi Doc, it's good seeing you again. I bet you must be happy that they nailed the people who got your wife," Jim said.

I simply nodded, and said that it was a good day.

"This is Joanie Belvedere," Jim said. "She's a good friend from home and she's looking at colleges around here," Jim added. "She doesn't think the University of Montana is good enough for her."

Joanie playfully nudged Jim, and said, "Yes, I'd love to finish college at Georgetown if I could."

"That's a hard school to get into," I told her with a smile.

Jim smiled back at me, and said, "Well, it's not too hard to get into if you have the President pulling strings for you." Joannie swatted him again, and Jim said, "We're off to catch the campus tour. Again, I'm glad they got those creeps for you, Doc."

I thanked Jim, and shook his hand, and watched as the two of them as they walked down the hall. Joanie was full of spunk and energy, and Jim towered protectively above her as they walked through the halls of The White House.

I was still standing in the hall, watching Jim and his daughter walk down the hallway when John Sturgis walked up to me and said, “Doctor West, the President has only a few minutes for you today, and she’ll have to see you in The Oval Office.”

John took me down the hallway, and turned right into the hall leading to The Oval Office. We passed the young military officer with the briefcase handcuffed to his wrist, and he stared straight ahead as we passed. Entering The Oval Office, I could see the President was with Ambassador Urain of Syria. He was dressed impeccably in his business suit as usual, but I was surprised to see the two engaged in a jovial conversation.

When we entered, both the President and Ambassador Urain stood up from their chairs, and President Amanda Stonegate said, “Dr. West, this is Ambassador Urain of Syria.”

Urain smiled at me and said, "I'm very happy to make your acquaintance, Doctor," and bowed his head slightly and shook my hand.

Sturgis nudged him and said, "Yeah, you're happy to meet anybody. That's what you do for a living."

Urain playfully replied, "Well, at least I have my own job."

Sturgis said, "You haven't been able to do anything for yourself -- ever. Even in college, we had to hand you the ball."

President Amanda Stonegate rolled her eyes, and said, "John and the Ambassador both played football together for the glory of Stanford years ago."

John Sturgis then continued his ribbing, "Yeah, Urain thought he was a hotshot soccer player, but for us all he did was kick the ball after we handed it to him."

Urain shot back, "I won the game against UCLA for you with my field goal."

"But only after I intercepted the ball to set up your chip shot," Sturgis shot back.

Again, President Stonegate rolled her eyes, and said, "Jocks-they always stick together."

Urain pointed his finger at Sturgis, and said, “Yes, I’ve always had to take care of him. American intelligence – ha. I’d be shocked if your American intelligence officers can find the bathroom. If I hadn’t told you where those derelicts in the desert were hiding, you would still be running back and forth across the field.”

Then, Ambassador Urain turned to me and said, “Doctor, while I’m here protesting the American incursion into Syrian sovereign territory... and putting up with this guy,” he said, pointing to Sturgis, “I would like to offer you my sincere condolences on the loss of your wife. You need to know that we in Syria, or in the Arab world, do not condone or protect murderers.”

I nodded at Urain, and said, “Thank you, Ambassador, I appreciate that.”

Urain looked at me, and said, “By the way, we never met.”

“Yes sir, I know,” I said with a smile.

President Amanda Stonegate turned to me, and said, “We’re still a little busy around here, so we don’t have much time. The Ambassador, though, wanted to meet you and express his condolences.”

She walked across The Oval Office to her desk and picked up a box gift wrapped as though it were a birthday present. “This is for you, Dr. West. I won’t need it anymore,” The President said. I opened it up, and saw a slightly used can of mace.

I grinned, and said, “Thank you, Madame President.”

Ambassador Urain only raised his eyebrows, and did not say anything. Sturgis was implacable as usual.

President Stonegate turned to me, and said, “Now that we have killed or captured the group responsible for your wife’s murder, do you still forgive them?”

I was quiet for a moment, and said, “I think I’m on my way.”

Sturgis and Ambassador Urain smiled sympathetically at me, but Amanda Stonegate caught me with her deep brown eyes. “I think I’m on my way too,” she said. “I look forward to my Wednesday meetings concerning medicare,” she quickly added.

I smiled, “Yes, Ma’am, but I don’t think I win in our budget meetings,” I said.

“Get used to it,” John Sturgis added with a smile as he showed me the door.

I walked down the halls of The White House through the richly decorated hallways. The wallpaper covered centuries of history. I wondered if I peeled back the layers of wallpaper if I could see the scars on the walls from the British invasion of Washington during the war of 1812, or the other scars which were a bit less obvious.

I wondered if I peeled back a little further if I could see the scars on spot where President Wilson recovered from his stroke, or marks on the floor from Franklin Roosevelt's wheelchair, or the wet floor from the tears from Jacqueline Kennedy eyes after her husband was shot, or the spot where Richard Nixon wrestled with his ghosts during Watergate, or where Betty Ford drank too much, or where Bill Clinton barely contained his hormones and arrogance, or maybe where President Amanda Stonegate forgave her wandering husband. As a psychiatrist, I felt strangely at home here.

"I'll be back Wednesday," I told Sturgis.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR—

Paul Kettl is a psychiatrist who lives and works in Philadelphia. He enjoys teaching medical students and psychiatry interns and residents in training, and sees this book as a way to convey this information ... to you.

Paul is also a bad politician. After capturing the democratic nomination for US Congress from his home district, he lost to the republican incumbent in the general election. That experience made him wonder about politics, and politicians.

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