

The Grifter's Protocol



A Novel by
Gregory Wilson

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*You can't grift a grifter
Oh no, not at all.
You can't grift a grifter
Without the protocol*

Author Unknown

ONE

"So what is it that you are looking for?"

"You mean exactly?"

"Exactly."

The conversation between the two men had been going on for nearly twenty minutes. Which was nineteen minutes too long if you asked Nicholas Beckett. He always found small talk to be nothing but a big waste of time. If you have something to say, just say it. Or shut the fuck up.

The man Nicholas was talking to smiled. Sincere or not, Nicholas couldn't tell. He didn't know the man, at least not personally. He knew about him, though. Everyone knew about him. It comes with the territory when you are the fifth richest man in the world.

"Alright, fair enough," the man said. "Let's get down to why I flew you in to see me."

Nicholas nodded. "Nice jet, by the way. Appreciate it."

"Least I could do," the man said. "Now, as to why you are here. It seems that you have a stellar reputation for doing what you do."

"Which is?"

The man frowned. "Don't play dumb with me, Nicholas. I find it offensive. You know better than anyone what you are good at."

"I like to think that I have many skills."

"But only one that has supported you for the last twenty years. And, supported you quite well from what I have been able to determine."

"I make do."

“So it seems. But what you also make is advertising that actually works. That is a skill that is sorely lacking these days.”

“A lot of people create advertising.”

“True. But there are only a handful that have the skill that you do. As you know better than I, Nicholas, what advertising is today is not what advertising used to be. Most of those in the business today are only concerned about data. No one cares about the creative aspect anymore. Whether anyone actually watched the damn commercial or not is no longer important. All it seems anyone focuses on now is how many impressions an ad got. Not whether it actually made one.”

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders. “Call me old school. But you’re right, the business has changed.”

“And not for the better if you ask me. And I’m glad that you agree. Because that’s why you are here. You see, what I am looking for, Nicholas, is a campaign. A campaign that will shake up the world.”

Nicholas tried not to laugh, but a small smile still slipped out. A response that the man noticed.

“What? You find that funny?”

“No. It’s just that you’d be surprised how many times I’ve heard that—someone wanting a campaign that would shake up the world. I mean, people ask for it, but they seldom really want that.”

“Why’s that?”

“Shaking up the world is an expensive proposition.”

The man nodded. “But the difference between those people and me is that I have the money to do it.”

Nicholas couldn’t argue that last point. He had been looking around the room, a room the size of which made the house one of the most expensive in

Seattle. Correction, in the country. One of the most expensive homes in the entire god-damn country. Granted, it was done with a sense of taste. The type of taste that only money can buy. The walls were of wood and stone, done by hand, or so it looked. The snooker table—snooker, not billiards, mind you—was covered in a slate gray felt—bankers gray—Nicholas believed it was called. Books—more than could be found in most small-town libraries—filled two of the walls. They were sitting in one end of the room around a small leather-topped table, knee-high, apparently set up to form a more intimate circle in a room this large. On the table sat a hand-carved religious deity, Indonesian perhaps. No doubt an authentic piece and worth more than Nicholas could make in a year. Fuck that, five years, he thought. The only other thing on the table was a manila folder that was bulging out, holding more than it was designed to.

“No comment?” the man finally asked, noticing Nicholas’ silence.

Nicholas stared at the man across from him. His hair was cropped short, it had salt-and-peppered by now. He was 61, although a fit 61, Nicholas thought. Cycling was his passion, if you believed what you read on social media. Apparently, it’s how he relieved the stress from owning five, no, make that four different companies. He had recently sold one, which moved him up a notch to the position of the world’s fifth richest person.

He was, like most of the uber wealthy, in the press a lot. His marriages—three, divorces—three, kids—three. The press usually portrayed him as more good than bad, thanks to the PR team he no doubt had working for him around the clock. But the truth was that the extremely wealthy and icebergs had a lot in common. The part that can destroy you is the part that’s under the water, the part you never see. The part that’s not in the press. And that’s the part that worried him.

“Your four companies,” Nicholas began, “from what I’ve been able to find out online, all have ad agencies working for them, and damn good ones, at least in my opinion.”

“Yes, they do. And I agree, good they are.”

“So, it begs the question, doesn’t it?”

“And I imagine the question is why you?”

“Exactly.”

“I guess the answer to that question is because what I want you to sell has nothing to do with any of the four companies that I own. Well, that’s not exactly true. It does and it doesn’t.”

Nicholas looked at him quizzically.

“The reason I’m not being very clear is because what I want you to sell is not a product or a service.”

Nicholas’ patience was wearing thin. Something the man found hard not to notice.

“So, yes, okay then, let me just say it. What I want you to sell is hope.”

The two men looked at one another. Neither was smiling.

Nicholas finally broke the silence. “Hope? That’s what you said, right?”

The man nodded.

“May I ask in what?”

“Humanity.”

This time, Nicholas did smile, basically because he had heard enough. ‘Yeah, okay.’ Shaking his head, he leaned forward in his chair, starting to get up.

“If you are planning on leaving, I’d highly recommend that you allow me to finish. Then, and only then, if you still want to leave, I will do nothing to prevent it.”

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders. He didn't really believe that this man would actually try to stop him, but he eased back into the chair anyway. After all, it was his jet.

"The world is in a precarious position right now," the man continued. "And I believe that if it tilts much further in the direction that it is leaning, it might not come back."

"And somehow hope, at least in your opinion, changes that?"

"It does, yes, it does indeed. In fact, I think that it's the only thing that can change it."

Nicholas looked at his watch.

"I can see by your impatience that further explanation is needed."

The man got up and started to pace around the room. "You see, Nicholas, the politicians, their hands are dirty. The lobbyists have become too powerful thanks to rich people, hell, people like me. We own the politicians, not just in Washington, but every politician, everywhere, you name it, in the world. Those in power—congressmen, senators, even fucking presidents—are now just paid to support what we want and do what we tell them. It's always been this way, but never this bad. What a politician's constituents want has become irrelevant. What matters is what those with money want. After all, money is what gets politicians re-elected. So money is the drum that they march to.

Nicholas found himself shrugging his shoulders. Everyone knew that what the man was saying was true. It was what it was. Nothing was going to change that.

"You see, what you did just there, shrugging your shoulders, accepting it as a fait accompli, in other words, giving up. That's the problem. The way you are thinking right now is the way everyone is thinking right now. That it's too big a problem to solve so they just give up. Do you realize that over the last six

years the number of countries moving to authoritarianism is double that of the number moving towards democracy? I'm sure you understand where authoritarians get their money from to run their campaigns."

"People like you."

"Not like me, as I'm trying to stop them, but people with my financial resources, yes."

"And what does hope have to do with this?"

"We need hope so that people don't do what you just did. Shrug their shoulders, stop caring, and completely surrender the future to whomever buys it. The world is being overtaken by an apathy that to me, has become unnerving. The fight that used to be in people is dissolving."

"C'mon, the world's always had problems."

"Not like this. Just take the fact that the world is warming at an alarming pace. Or that school children are being gunned down by the hundreds by AK-15s. Name a border anywhere and there are immigration issues. And I haven't even mentioned the future pandemics we're going to face, or war and famine and pestilence. All these issues are big, too big for individuals to solve. Governments must get involved. And as your shrug indicated, we have given up all hope in governments. We watch people in office act even more scandalously every day. They get caught lying and instead of acting contrite, they double down on the lie, knowing that social media will help their lie become the truth among their supporters, fueling even greater public distrust and polarization.

Nicholas didn't even bother nodding. He knew the man was right. Hell, everyone knew that the man was right.

Having stopped pacing, the man once again sat down across from Nicholas.

“And the worst thing, Nicholas, the worst thing is that when people see their politicians and government officials not only doing nothing to stop the problems but actively working to exacerbate them, that’s when any hope of change disappears. And when we no longer have hope in our future, fear steps into the void. Fear ultimately leads to anger. Anger to hate. Hate to conflict. Conflict that causes otherwise simple, decent people to do horrible and terrible things.”

“Afraid you’re singing to the choir,” mumbled Nicholas.

“The choir, yes. Good choice of words. And it’s a choir that’s only getting bigger. Do you know how many people there are on this planet, right now as we speak?”

Seeing Nicholas shake his head no, the man continued. “Somewhere in the neighborhood of eight billion. When that many people lose hope and become angry, the violence that will be unleashed will be incomprehensible. Social media will fuel the anger like the wind fuels a flame. Conflicts will cross borders, each country fighting for survival, for food for their people, for water for their crops. The irony is that everyone will be fighting for the same thing.

“And in your mind, that’s what exactly?”

“Existence. And in a war like that, a war for existence, truly the first global planetary war, there can be no victors.”

Slowly, Nicholas started to applaud. If the man found it to be a sarcastic clap, he was right, as that is what Nicholas intended.

“Well, it’s a good speech, I’ll give you that. But I know you’re one of those Davos guys. Always giving speeches as to how you are going to save the world. But I got to tell you, from here in the cheap seats, and as you admitted, it’s the rich fuckers like you that are causing most of the problems you just described.”

Instead of arguing, the man waited for Nicholas to continue.

“And to fix what you have fucked-up you want me to create some advertising campaign that brings hope back into the world. As if that is even possible. And for what? So you can rub some salve on the corroded organ in your body that you call a soul. Really, it’s all rather idealistic, wouldn’t you say?”

“Idealistic?” The man laughed. “That’s where you’re wrong. And it’s the one thing you’ll learn about me, Nicholas, once we get to know each other better, is that I am not idealistic at all. What I am is a businessman. As you know from your research, my businesses are global. If the world loses hope, it stops functioning. And when the world stops functioning, my businesses lose money. And if there is one thing I don’t like doing, it’s losing money.

Another glance around the room was all it took to convince Nicholas that losing money was not something this man was very good at. He noticed two paintings in particular, signed by those who others study in art school.

The pause did give Nicholas time to come down from his high horse. “Okay, as for the other question you said you’d answer. Why me?”

“Oh, that, yes. It’s a relatively easy answer actually. And one that I thought you would have figured out by now. It’s because over the years, I’ve learned that a lone guy isn’t as easily compromised. If I gave the assignment to one of the agencies that work on my brands, no, that wouldn’t work. Those agencies are all part of big holding companies, public companies, there would be too much politicking involved. Too much worrying how it would affect their own stock price. Their reputation. Too many of their other clients to be concerned about. How creating hope may piss them off. Because trust me, doing something like this will piss certain people off. Wealthy people, especially. No, this has to be done by someone like you, someone with integrity, but who is also a lone wolf.”

“Who answers to you.”

“Yeah, but let me add...you’ll be a lone wolf with a piss pot of money.”

The man waited for Nicholas to ask how much. It’s the question all advertising people want the answer to. How much? Surprisingly, Nicholas didn’t go there.

“You surprise me, Nicholas. Don’t you want to know?”

“Know what?”

The man smiled.

“If you mean the size of the pot I get to piss in, no. Not really.”

“May I ask why?”

“I’m not taking the job.”

“Again, the same question. Why?”

“‘Cause I don’t see much...well...I guess the only word to use here is hope, in what you are trying to accomplish.”

“Really? Is that it, really? I mean, isn’t hope what great advertising creates for all brands? In fact, I believe that you can argue that hope is really all advertising ever creates. Hope or failure, obviously.”

He pushed the over-flowing file that was on the leather-topped table in front of him over to Nicholas’ side.

“And what I’ve been reading about you, Nicholas, is that failure is not something that you are good at.”

As Nicholas opened the file, press clippings started to fall out. They were all about him. His successes.

“As you can see, that folder is basically your career. Impressive, I must say.”

Reaching over, the man picked out one article from the pile.

“I especially liked this one. It’s about when you quit the business and went out on your own, saying you needed to be scared again. To create what hasn’t yet been created, the type of advertising, wait here it is...” he read from the article... “*that scares the bejesus out of people*, end quote. You mention that holding companies could never allow that sort of advertising, that it would have to come from, I think your exact words were...yes, here they are, a lone wolf.”

Nicholas knew the man was right. It was all right there in black and white. It was also true that he was still waiting to do the type of advertising that hadn’t ever been done.

“So here’s the question for you, Nicholas. Do you truly want to be scared? Or, are you too scared to do this?”

Slowly, Nicholas started to cram the articles back into the folder. He knew he had to do something to control his anger. To be scared about his creative abilities, no, no one had ever challenged him on that before. Instead of lashing out, he kept trying to get the articles back in the folder, but there were too many of them. Giving up, he looked up at the man.

“Well, you are thorough, I’ll give you that. But here’s the thing. What you are asking for is impossible. Like you, I’m also not an idealist. And as a realist, I understand that advertising has a hard enough time selling something as simple as beer. To ask it to sell something existential like fueling hope in humanity—I mean, good God, really? You have a lot of faith in advertising to think it can sell hope in this messed up world that we live in.”

“Not to sell hope to humanity, Nicholas. I must correct you. What I want you to do is *create* hope in humanity. As for the power of advertising, yes, I do believe in it. In fact, in all of history, I don’t believe that there has ever been a

greater wealth creation tool than advertising, do you? And we both know how it creates that wealth. By influencing the masses.”

Again getting up, the man walked over to the thirty foot, carved wooden bar that was next to the largest fireplace Nicholas had ever seen outside of a ski lodge. As he reached for a decanter on the top of the bar, he turned to Nicholas.

“Scotch?”

“No thanks.

“Twenty-five year old.”

Of course it was. “Nice, but...still no.”

“Suit yourself. Pouring himself a glass, he continued. “You know, I have a motto, Nicholas.”

How cliché, thought Nicholas. A fucking motto. All rich guys had them. They play well as sound-bites in the press.

“You know what it is? Four words. *It can be done.*” He swept his arm to indicate the expanse of the room. “You see, the reason I have all of this is because of those four, simple words.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” Nicholas said as he stood up to leave. “But if it can be done, it will have to be done by someone other than me.”

Shrugging his shoulders, the man finally seemed to accept defeat.

“As you wish, of course. My driver will escort you back to my plane which has been refueled and is now ready to return you to San Francisco.”

Nicholas turned to leave and started walking to the door. It was only when he got to it that the man called out.

“But, Nicholas, if you change your mind, and I do hope you do, you do know where to find me.”

TWO

Either the hills are getting steeper or I'm getting older, thought Nicholas Beckett, slowly continuing his walk up the steepest part of Fillmore from Union Street.

The latter wasn't up for debate. He was forty-five, an age that is considered by many to be ancient by advertising standards. He always found it ironic that advertising was the only job where the experience that comes with age works against you.

Well, advertising and exotic dancing.

He knew that quitting the luxury of working for a holding company was a risk at his age. But he had spent 18 years at agencies—building up a creative reputation that let him hop from agency to agency, each time for a six-figure raise in pay. And while the money was good, he couldn't help but notice something.

As his wallet got full, his mind got empty—the less creative he became. The great ideas stopped coming. It's a disease that afflicts those who get too comfortable, too well-off. Rocking the boat becomes less of a prerequisite. Taking chances becomes less exciting. Rot attacks the brain. Instead of trying to change the world, you are just trying to hang on to what you've got.

Of course, you rationalize your discomfort. You convince yourself that the problem is that clients don't want greatness. That greatness scares them. If something is great, it means that it hasn't been done before. And if they approve something that hasn't been done before, then it is their ass that is on the line.

No, most clients don't want to buy a 'great' idea. Good enough is good enough. Nicholas had one client who told him that they were quite proud of

taking an idea that was excellent and making it just very good. Very good was safe. Excellence was scary. In his early days in the business, that kind of thinking was something that Nicholas wouldn't accept.

But he wasn't young anymore. And at his age, while selling out may not be the worst feeling in the world, in Nicholas's mind, it was right up there in the top three.

So he did what he knew he needed to do. What he had been planning to do for a while. He quit. Just like that. Cold turkey. Said fuck it and walked away from the big agency perks, the titles, the bennies. At forty-two. He knew that what his soul craved was to be challenged again. To push himself up against the unknown. To find clients who liked unsettled waters and rocky boats. Basically, he wanted to find a limb to walk out on, not knowing if his next step would indeed snap it in two.

So far, the limbs had all held.

Clients, hearing that he was out on his own and knowing of his reputation, quickly contacted him to work on their brands. And while they paid well to have the great Nicholas Beckett working for them, they were too cautious or frightened to approve something anywhere close to exceptional.

Nicholas knew that he should just tell them to go fuck themselves. But the money they were paying...good god...to walk away from that, no, that would be hard.

It took him two plus years to finally man up and started turning them down. To convince himself that working just for the money just wasn't worth it. Wasn't that why he left the big agency business in the first place?

And then this happens. He gets handed an assignment that actually demands greatness. To create hope in god-damn humanity. What creative guy wouldn't jump at such an opportunity?

Well, apparently him. 'Cause what did he do? He ran. Got up and fucking ran. Was he scared? Wasn't that what the man insinuated? Right to his face, no less. Scared that he no longer had the creative chops to deliver what was needed.

Damn right he was scared. Did he still have it? He honestly didn't know. That's why he ran. Because maybe, just maybe, it was better not to find out.

That's why he said that it couldn't be done. That nobody could do it. He knew he was lying. What scared him was that he didn't know if he, Nicholas Beckett, could do it. Not anymore. What truly frightened him was that he had turned into what he had always thought he would rather shoot himself than become.

A hack.

The only good thing was that no one knew, he thought. No one will ever know that he ran. That he had lost all confidence in himself. That he was offered the job and turned it down. No, no one will ever fucking know.

Except for him.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," he shouted out loud as he crested the Fillmore Street hill, causing a mother pushing a stroller to stare at him indignantly.

It took him three more nights of not sleeping. Three more days of aimlessly wandering the ever-changing neighborhoods of San Francisco, three more days of convincing himself that he was right, that it couldn't be done, three more days before he made the call.

"Please hold," said the man's assistant.

"Nicholas," said the man. "I was hoping you'd call."

"I've got one caveat," said Nicholas.

"Go on."

“You buy what I come up with. Or, you don’t. Either way is fine by me. But here’s what you can’t do. You can’t fucking change it. The idea. Whatever it is, it has to remain pure. It has to remain true. I’ll solve your problem. I’ll give you a creative solution. And it will be the right solution. But it will be only one solution. Because if it is to be the right one, there can only be one.”

The man said nothing.

“If you can live by that one rule, I’ll do it.”

“You know, Nicholas, I’ve gotten to where I am by trusting my instincts. And my instincts said, after doing my research on you, of course, were that you were the one. I believe in trusting the people I work with. You’re the creative genius, not me. So yes, when it comes to trust regarding you and what you come up with, you have mine.”

“I’ll let you know when I have something.”

“I look forward to it, Nicholas. I truly do.”

THREE

Two more weeks had passed. Two more weeks of walking up the hills and through the fog the city is famous for, trying to come up with an idea that might work. Two weeks and still, he had nothing. That was highly unusual for Nicholas. No wonder he wasn't sleeping.

There are three ways that a man can feel impotent. One is in the bedroom, but they have invented drugs for that. Another is when a man is the family's provider, and he can't find a decent job. Guess you could argue that they've found drugs for that as well. At least drugs to help you escape facing the fact that you're a failure. The last way is when the man is a creative guy and he can't come up with a fucking idea.

No one knows where ideas come from. Creative people all have their own methods and ways of getting the process started. For Nicholas, it was studying the problem until everything that could be studied, was studied. And then, walking. Just walking. Letting the unconscious do its work. Sifting through all that he had studied. Coming up with answers to the problems that he could express creatively. It had never let him down. Until now. Why in the hell was he finding it so difficult now?

What he did know was that the man in Seattle was right. The world was awash in problems, big problems that would require big actions to solve. The type of actions that can only come from people in power—governments. And if the people running the governments were in the pockets of those who benefited from the problem, then yes, all hope was gone.

Social media wasn't helping. With the introduction of 'like', 'retweet', and 'share' buttons, posts that were out and out lies could be—and were—spreading everywhere. People were looking at 'likes' as proof that what was

being said was true. Intelligence was no longer being delivered from the top down, but from the bottom up. If someone liked what you said, it not only implied that you were right, but smart. Dangerous ground indeed.

Ignorance was applauded and rewarded. Which is why most of those who lived online thought they were fucking geniuses.

As for the politicians themselves, the hypocrisy and outright lying they incorporated were now expected rather than shunned. The shamelessness they exuded when caught in a lie was like a super power. Don't back down, double down. Let the lie be backed up on social media. It won't take long. Lies spread six times faster than the truth on social media. Repeat it enough, and people start to see the lie as true. And, you as right. Letting them not only forgive you, but cheer you on.

The strategy for politicians was simple. Attack. Attack. Attack. Never, never, never admit that you were wrong. Never.

Nicholas remembered an earlier time, a time when it seemed as if politicians at least had a conscience. In the past, they at least tried to *appear* to be truthful. Back then, lying was considered a serious enough offense to be booted from office.

Now it seemed as if lying had become a prerequisite for being elected to office.

And then staying in office, that's what required the bucks. Big money that politicians knew came from turning their backs on the injustices they saw. It was easy cash to take because it wasn't just you—everyone else was doing it, too. It's the way the game was played now was what they were told.

Game? What game? That was the problem, wasn't it? It isn't a game.

Lives hang in the balance. The heatwaves that were spreading across the planet, the fires, the hurricanes, and floods that were causing people to lose

their homes and livelihoods. The Earth was revolting against the ways that humans were treating it. Everyone knew it. And yet, politicians just smiled and said it was normal. Normal? How in the hell can anyone call 6 weeks of temperatures being over 110 degrees normal?

Yes, the man in Seattle was right. Change was needed. That was clear. But how to do it, that wasn't. And to try and do it by creating hope, holy hell, man. How does one create hope in a world as fucked up as this?

He thought back to the one time he remembered hoping for something. His marriage, which had turned rocky after only three short years. His fault? Probably. He had asked his then-wife if there was any hope that they could make it work. Any hope that he could change?

She didn't even bother to say no. She just laughed.

The truth is that one can either hope or one can do. Hope, by itself, is passive. It's almost the opposite of doing. An excuse not to do. It's like wishing on a star. It's a way of buying time, a rationalization for someone to procrastinate and do nothing. Well, I *hope* it works. But the truth is that you can't just hope for something to happen. You have to make it happen.

His wife was the *doing* type. She didn't hope that a divorce would happen. She finalized the damn thing in two weeks.

So, hope, hell, how could he create it when—if he was honest—he wasn't even sure what it actually was? And to create it for whom exactly? Humanity? As if that's even supposed to mean something.

When the call went through, he was once again put on hold. Five minutes later he heard, "Nicholas, so sorry to keep you waiting. I'm hoping—no pun intended—that this means you have something."

“I do. Two questions,” replied Nicholas. “An ad or commercial needs to come from something—a person, a brand, a company. You can’t just run a message and not let people know who’s paying for it.”

“Yes, I’m aware. And your question?”

“Which one of the companies or brands that you own is this coming from?”

“None that already exist or that you know of. I’ve started something new, a 501(c)(3) that I’m calling *The Betterment Alliance*.

Nicholas said nothing.

“Am I to read from your silence that you are not impressed with the name?”

“A name’s a name,” said Nicholas. “Any name needs context to have meaning. You could argue that Apple is a silly name for a computer company. But through advertising and their products, they sure as hell found a way to make Apple mean something.”

“Fair enough. As for the other?”

“Other what?”

“You said you had two questions.”

“Yes, we never talked budget.”

“As I remember, at the time, you were somewhat less than interested.”

“That was then.”

“Okay. Here’s the deal. My contemporaries, those other extremely wealthy people I’m often grouped together with—they’re busy spending their fortunes building spaceships and rockets or alternative realities. Trying to orbit the earth, or colonize Mars, or create meta-verses that we can all live in.”

“I’ve noticed.”

“I don’t need a rocket ship, Nicholas. And I have no desire to move to Mars. The only thing real to me is right now and right here. Fix this place, and you won’t have to go live in your alternate realities or your second home on faraway planets. At least, that’s my philosophy. So here’s what I want you to do. Consider this, this project, as my moonshot. And budget accordingly. Whatever they’re spending on their little hobbies, you can spend on this. You see, there’s a difference between me and my fellow wealthy colleagues, Nicholas.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

“I prefer spending my billions trying to save the world rather than trying to find a way to leave it.”

“If you say so,” said Nicholas. It all sounded a little too Davosy for his liking. But what the hell. It wasn’t his money. “So what I’m hearing you say is that I shouldn’t hold back?”

“I’d be disappointed if you did. By the way, I realized that I never asked you how much you charge.”

“Ten percent of the total spend.”

“In that case, I’m afraid that you have the chance to become a very wealthy man, Nicholas. Now, when do you think I can see something?”

“When I have it, I’ll know. And when I know, you’ll be next.”

FOUR

His friend, Anthony Ridgeway, was already seated at the table when Nicholas arrived at the restaurant. They had agreed to this lunch date more than a month ago. Nicholas wasn't really in the mood for seeing anybody. Impotence tends to do that to a creative person—turns you both bitchy and cranky. But then again, it was Anthony. Probably good, thought Nicholas. Anthony was an old friend. A willing ear. Someone he could complain to who might understand.

The two of them had worked together at a previous agency. Both were creatives, and both shared a mutual distrust for the ad business and for agencies in general. Probably why their lunches were outspoken, opinionated affairs.

Of course, the wine always seemed to help the opinions flow more fluidly. Anthony liked to think of himself as an oenophile and didn't mind showing off his so-called knowledge whenever they got together. Not surprisingly, he had poured them each a glass from the bottle he had ordered and was already enjoying. Which meant that he had already done all the pretentious shit that people do who think they know what they are doing when it comes to wine. Looking up as Nicholas took his seat, he greeted him.

"So, my good friend. I think you will like this particular bottle. Somewhat under the radar but extremely tasty."

Obligingly, Nicholas raised his glass and took a sip. His smile told Anthony all he needed to know.

"See. Told you. I mean, am I ever wrong? Now I must say, it's been a while, Nic. I do hope you've been up to something interesting."

Smiling at Anthony, Nicholas realized that he had always been a bit envious of him. He was one of those who seemed to forget that they were supposed to look older over time. They were similar in age, but while Anthony's hair had salt and peppered, the body and face were still lithe. He still had a jaw that could cut glass, the bastard. And eyes that could somehow entice women in as if caught in a vortex. Both factors helping to strengthen his reputation as a ladies' man.

"We used to be good, right?" asked Nicholas. He could see Anthony fidget, showing that he didn't like the question.

"That's a loaded question. Good at what?"

"You know, being creative. Coming up with ideas."

"What's this used to be shit?" he said.

Seeing the consternation on Anthony's face, Nicholas had to laugh. He had forgotten that any comments about age and becoming less creative always got under Anthony's skin. But the truth was that everyone in the business knew that there was an expiry date for creatives. It was as if they had a warning label stamped on their backs. *Best if used before hair turns gray*. Somehow, gray hair was similar to mold on cheese. While the occasional person may find mold fantastic, most saw it as a sign that the cheese—or the person—is past their best used by time date.

"Sorry, man. Forgot that you're sensitive to that shit. What I mean is, I'm working for this client and I don't have a fucking clue how to deliver what he wants."

"Perfect time then to come see Doctor Ridgeway," smiled Anthony as he took another sip of wine. "Pray tell, who's the client?"

"Warren Holt."

Anthony stopped, putting his glass down as he looked up at Nicholas. As his smile disappeared, a quiet whistle escaped from his lips.

“THE Warren—”

“There’s only one, I’m afraid.”

“Shit. Wow. Fuck. I mean, that dude’s a heavy hitter. Owns a lot of companies and brands, and, I mean, shit...which one does he want you to work on?”

As the waiter came over to take their order, Anthony waved him away. “Give us five, will ya, buddy?”

Nicholas waited for the waiter to leave before continuing with a slightly lowered voice.

“None of them. Well, at least none that you know of. What he wants me to do is sell...” Here he paused and started to laugh, shaking his head. It sounded too preposterous to even say it out loud.

“What?” Anthony was puzzled. “What’s so fucking funny?”

“It’s what he wants me to sell. I don’t know how to say it. It’s—damn—it just sounds weird to even...”

“C’mon, man, spit it out.”

‘Okay, okay...what he wants me to sell is...is...is...hope.’

Anthony’s look told Nicholas what he already knew. He didn’t believe him. And he was miffed that he wouldn’t trust him.

“All right then, asshole, don’t tell me.”

“No, honestly, that’s what it is. Really.”

“Hope?”

“Yep.”

“Okay, I’ll bite. Hope in what?”

“This will probably only make you madder, but hope in the future.”

“Fuck you, Nicholas. I mean, really. Fuck you. And here I ordered us this nice bottle of wine.”

He didn’t mean to piss Anthony off. So saying less was probably better than more at this point. But Anthony could tell from Nicholas’s look that he wasn’t kidding. “Wait, you’re serious, aren’t you? He wants you to sell hope? In the future? Here? On this planet?”

Nicholas nodded as he held out his glass for a refill, but Anthony was too busy laughing to notice. “Now you find it funny?” said Nicholas, helping himself to the bottle.

“Sorry. Can’t help it. Hell, this Holt character must think advertising is a lot more magical than we know it to be.”

Nicholas couldn’t argue. “It’s funny, but I said almost the same thing to Holt. Know what he said?”

Anthony shook his head.

“Said great advertising has always created hope for brands, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah, but that’s different.”

“How exactly? I mean advertising creates hope for say, Nike, by selling shoes, right? “

“Right.”

The brand is Nike. The product is shoes. Selling the product creates hope for the brand.”

Anthony could only nod. Nicholas was right. “Okay, so what’s the brand in this case?”

Nicholas paused. This is what he was still trying to figure out. “I think it’s like this. If advertising can create hope for Nike, the brand, and we’re supposed to create hope for humanity, then doesn’t humanity become the brand?”

Anthony shrugged his shoulders. “Makes sense. But then, what’s the fucking product?”

“Why do you think I’ve been having such a hard time, Anthony? I think what Holt wants me to create is a product.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah, no shit. I mean, I don’t think it’s advertising per se that Holt believes in as much as it is the power of creativity.”

“Why do you say that?”

“It’s what he said to me in Seattle. ‘Creativity can change the world, Nicholas. In fact, it’s the only thing that always has.’ Holt just sees advertising as the means by which to get creativity dispersed to the masses.”

“But hope?”

“Yeah, hope.

“I mean, you know the last person who created hope in people, don’t you?” asked Anthony. “That long-haired, bearded dude. And I’m guessing that you remember what happened to him.”

Nicholas nodded.

“Yeah, that’s right, fucking crucified, buddy,” said Anthony. “All I can say is that if you’re going to get crucified, I sure as hell hope he’s paying you a shitload of money.”

“He is.”

“Meaning?”

Nicholas fidgeted before answering. “Budget’s unlimited.”

That got Anthony’s attention.

“When you say unlimited, do you mean like *unlimited*, unlimited?”

“Holt said to spend on this what his other billionaire cronies are spending to launch rockets into space.”

“Is that so?”

“Yep.”

Picking up his phone, Anthony started to search for something.

“What are you doing?” asked Nicholas.

“Checking to see what was spent on that most recent rocket launch by that other rich fucker.” A small whistle emanated from his lips. “Holy shit, Nicholas. Do you know what that cost?”

Nicholas nodded. “Five and a half billion, right?”

Anthony nodded. “He really said spend that much?”

“Yep.”

Looking back at his phone, Anthony continued reading. “Got the guy four minutes of weightlessness. You’re telling me that you’ve got over...”

As the waiter once again approached the table, Anthony waved him away for the second time, looked around to make sure no one was listening, and then lowered his voice.

“...you’re telling me you’ve got over five fucking billion to spend? On an ad campaign?”

“I know. Sounds crazy. But the way Holt explained it was that he’s worth about a hundred billion. I looked it up. Fifth richest guy in the world. He’s willing to spend five percent of his hundred billion, which he said is a little like a rounding error to him. Besides, he told me that he probably pays less in taxes than I did. So he felt an obligation to return some of his resources to society, in a way that he felt could most benefit the most people.”

“Benefit society? Yeah, right. That’s a bunch of crapola. The rich aren’t any more altruistic than you and I. You know the old saying, right? You can be either staggeringly rich or you can be altruistic. But not both. There are no saints who fly private, my friend.”

“Yeah, maybe. But I didn’t really care whether it was all bullshit or not. I mean to achieve what he wants—to give people enough hope so that we don’t just all become apathetic zombies and start killing each other—it’s probably going to take every one of those five billion dollars.”

“Well, you have to find the irony somewhat humorous,” said Anthony, a smile on his face. “I mean, advertising and capitalism, those are the things that a lot would argue have created most of the problems our world is facing. And now this guy wants us to use these same two vehicles to try and save it.”

“Yeah, that’s one of the reasons why I’m struggling. That and the fact that I don’t even know if it’s fucking possible.”

Noticing that his glass was empty, Anthony reached for the bottle.

“So, who you working on it with? Bouncing ideas off of?”

Nicholas shook his head. “No one. You’re the first person I’ve told about it.”

“And if I’m also the last, you got a deal.”

“Deal? What deal?”

“I’ll work on it with you. I’m currently between freelance gigs, so I’ve got some time. We’ll do it together. Just you and me, no one else. C’mon, it will be like old times.”

“Funny, I don’t remember asking you, Anthony.”

Anthony looked up at Nicholas. They had been friends for a long time. They knew each other better than they probably knew themselves.

“Yeah, you did, Nic. Yeah, you did. You just didn’t know it.”

As the waiter had hesitantly circled back for a third time, Anthony shot him a look. “About time you came by,” he said with a smile.

FIVE

So what is it, actually...this thing we call hope?

Nicholas knew that would be the first thing they would need to try to figure out if they wanted to have any chance in hell of trying to create it. Which is why when Anthony asked the same question during their lunch, it didn't come as a surprise.

"You know, if you pressed me, I'd have a hard time trying to explain what the hell hope even is," Anthony said. "I mean, we all have hoped for something, sure, but it's a bit of an amorphous entity, wouldn't you say? It exists, I guess, but you can't see it, touch it, smell it, or taste it. You can only sense it."

"And feel it," Nicholas added.

"Yeah, there is that, I guess."

Looking the word hope up in the dictionary, they found this.

A feeling of expectation and desire for certain things to happen.

Or, the belief that things will get better.

Or, that it's an optimistic state of mind. A person's desire or longing for an imagined set of circumstances that might occur in the future.

Desire and longing. Sure, good advertising can do that. Create desire. Create longing. But, it is usually for a thing - a car, a dishwasher, earrings. This was different. What they were being asked to do was to create desire and longing *for* desire and longing. Isn't that what creating hope in hope actually meant?

That's a bit different than what advertising does. With advertising, once longing is created for a thing, people can go out and actually buy the thing.

As far as Nicholas knew, hope wasn't for sale on Amazon.

Or, was it?

Wasn't that what Amazon actually did sell? Hope? Wasn't Amazon, in reality, a digital wish book? Like the Sears Catalogue used to be the analog wish book around Christmas time? And isn't wishing the same as hoping?

And what the fuck were they actually supposed to be doing? Was it to get someone to *consider* hoping? Was that the job here? Or was it to get people to choose hope over apathy? But not just to choose hope over apathy—what Holt wanted was for Nicholas to create the *belief* that hope is even possible. That's what he was really being asked to do, wasn't it? Wasn't that what Holt had said—to *create* hope? Not to sell it. To Holt, the problem was that people had stopped believing that hope was even possible.

But there was a bigger question bothering Nicholas, and he knew that was the question they needed to answer first, before they could do anything else. Was hope even real? Does it actually exist? After all, is an optimistic state of mind real? Or does it just exist as, well, a state of mind? Or, in other words, in our imagination only?

Fuck if I know, he thought. But over the next few days, the more he and Anthony talked about it, fleshed it out, argued, the more they started to lean into the fact that states of mind, like positive or negative emotions, are real. Or, at least, real in the minds they're residing in.

Anthony brought up the religious aspect—that for many, hope was the same as faith or religion. And the way that those who believed in a higher power exercised hope was through prayer. But the job here wasn't to get people to pray. It wasn't about believing in a god or having faith. It wasn't about promoting a supreme being to follow and support. To put your hope in a him or a her or an it. No, that wasn't the job here. Warren Holt didn't even

want anyone to know that he was behind any of this. So it wasn't about turning Warren Holt into the next Jesus Christ. No, the job here was to create a feeling of hope in people in the same way that advertising creates wants in people.

Nicholas knew that he and Anthony could create advertising that would make people *want* a certain car, or brand of beer, or type of shoe. That they were good at. And *wanting* a better future, *wanting* to have hope in tomorrow, that would be easy to create because, hell, who doesn't want that?

But would just *wanting* a better future actually *change* anything? For hope to exist, doesn't change have to be seen as being achievable? Which made the job not so much one of creating hope as it was one of creating change. Change was the actual product here, wasn't it? If you first create change, a change that people can see and experience, *then* people have something tangible to believe in or buy, and hope has a chance of occurring.

They were working out of Nicholas' place, trying to hash out a campaign. Or an idea. Any fucking thing that might get them going, make them think that they had a chance. After a frustrating week of doing this, they still had nothing. "You know what the problem is, Nicholas, not everyone is hoping for the same thing. I mean, look at the two different political parties in this country," said Anthony.

Yep. That was a major problem. What do you want people to hope for? What do you want to try and change? Was there anything that everyone, regardless of political affiliation, could agree on, something that everyone wanted?

The other problem was one that Anthony raised. "Is it a result or an action we're trying to communicate here?" he asked. "I mean, if we show the result, what the world *could* be if we're all more hopeful, well, that's going to come off as too Pollyannaish for me."

"We can always show a world without hope," Nicholas sarcastically suggested.

"You mean reality? Yeah, good idea. That will fire people up."

"Maybe an unreal, real world then?"

"No, no, we have to stay real," said Anthony. "But not a real that is so real that it's a downer. But a real that inspires."

Easier said than done.

What good advertising does is get people to want A instead of B. In this case, it was hope instead of apathy. It would be easy to try to convince people not to be apathetic. To let them know that apathy is what the bad guys want. If all the people in the world become apathetic to what is happening, it means they stop caring about what their leaders do. This is exactly what autocratic leaders are, well, hoping for. But telling people not to be apathetic doesn't, by itself, make those same people hopeful. For that, Nicholas knew they had to show that change was actually possible by somehow, making change occur.

Round and round they went. They had worked together enough over the years so that they weren't embarrassed to throw out half-baked ideas or even dumb-ass suggestions. Never knew what it might spark. But after yet another day of nothing, Anthony was ready to pack it in. All he knew is that whatever they came up with had to be big.

"Big like a Super Bowl spot big," he had said offhandedly.

"Hell, with the amount of money we have to spend, we could do two or three Super Bowl spots," said Nicholas.

"Fuck that," laughed Anthony. "With the billions we have, I think we could buy every spot on the game."

They both paused. That wasn't such a crazy idea. Even before Nicholas told him to do it, Anthony was online trying to find out how many spots there

are in a Super Bowl. “Last year, there were about 65 commercials during the game itself,” he said, reading off his laptop.

“Really? And how much per spot?”

“Wait a minute. Yep, here it is. Looks like around seven million.”

Nicholas was already punching in the numbers on his phone’s calculator.

“So around five hundred million dollars to buy every spot,” he said.

“Shit, we can do it,” laughed Anthony. “Can you imagine?”

Nicholas could. “And what if we made it an ongoing story? Each commercial carrying the story forward. Assuming each of those 65 commercials was thirty seconds, it would mean we’d have around 30 minutes to play with. It would be like making a short movie.”

Now they were both getting excited. “This actually gives me hope,” smiled Anthony. “Now, all we need to do is come up with a fucking story to tell.”

SIX

It went by the name *Democracy's New Network* and the acronym *DNN*. It was a cable news network that was part of a monolithic corporation with tentacles in every form of media currently available.

Roger Meekins was its CEO, a man who knew how to do one thing extremely well. Make money. Lots of it. His formula was both simple and long-standing. Money follows viewers. And viewers follow outrage. The more outlandish the lead, the more people would tune in to watch. Increase the eyeballs, increase the advertising revenues, increase his salary.

Whether the so-called news his channel reported was true or not mattered very little to Roger Meekins. In his mind, truth had become a pliable entity. And if you asked Meekins—off the record, of course—he'd tell you that truth in the news today was actually kind of optional.

If the viewer wanted to believe what the Democracy's News Network was telling them, then apparently it was true, was it not? At least for that particular viewer.

Where telling the truth used to be each news network's responsibility for maintaining its license, that responsibility more or less went out the window, right along with the requirement for news programs to offer equal time for competing views. The repeal of the Fairness Doctrine as a violation of free speech sealed the deal.

Now, one had to find the competing point of view on a competing channel. If they wanted to. In other words, deciding on what the truth was became the responsibility of the viewer. A responsibility that most viewers didn't take seriously.

On social media, it was even more of a shit-show. On the online platform, alternative facts were real. If a posting had enough followers or received enough 'likes', that was all it took to basically verify, its accuracy, making it true.

If viewers took the half-truths that Meekins told on his network and filled in the rest, who was he, or Democracy's News Network, to argue? Truth had become like beauty. Subjective. Entirely in the eye of the beholder.

Did it concern him that this way of doing business had some people declaring that DNN was a corruptor of journalistic integrity? Hardly. C'mon. The news was no longer Walter Cronkite. News was now part of the entertainment business.

And entertaining, well, that was the second thing Roger Meekins knew how to do very well.

He knew that he drew his viewership primarily from the conservative, far-right side of the political divide. Tapping into their narrative had made his network extremely profitable. Although criticized, he would argue that it was only fair; that the conservative side needed a voice as the other side already had their so-called networks, i.e., voices. If the conservatives didn't have a chance to be fairly represented, well then, was that truly democracy? Which is why he decided to brand his channel Democracy's News Network. After all, he was saving democracy, not destroying it, wasn't he?

It was a lie that allowed him to sleep very well.

Until recently.

Being a numbers guy, he was constantly scanning the ratings. And lately, a pattern was emerging that was all too concerning. A decline in viewership. Nothing dramatic, but noticeable nonetheless. A stolen election, vaccination mandates, global warming bullshit, the topics that used to bring in the

numbers were becoming old hat. Even a mass shooting at a school was of more interest to the left than the right. Everyone knew the solution the right would offer. Thoughts and prayers, yes, but also arm more people to stop those who are already armed. The old trope—the only way to stop a bad guy with a gun is a good guy with a gun—would always be brought out and dusted off.

Great line, even if all the data said it was complete bullshit. Yet somehow, the right continued to nod their heads and buy it, hook, line, and sinker.

Seeing his network's declining numbers, he realized that what he needed now was a new focus for his audience. Something that they could come together over and get angry about. After all, anger, that was the crucial ingredient to the ratings secret sauce, wasn't it? *Enraged=Engaged*—that was the new business mantra for cable news. Outrage was always handsomely rewarded in the ratings.

Usually, he could count on the left to accommodate him on that front—doing something stupid like saying that the country should defund the police, or the whole woke thing. God, when the left went woke, it made it so easy. By fighting for the progressive extreme, pushing ideologies that made sense anywhere but in reality, all the left accomplished nudging the middle further and further to the right. And the middle, well, that was the real America. That's where the deciding votes were. Political parties lose the mainstream when their cultural values go extreme. Meekins knew that his alt-right viewers were loud, but small. A minority. If he could make it seem like the left was even more wacko than the right, then his minority would draw more from the middle. Making his viewing audience even larger. Ensuring that the riches kept flowing in.

What he needed now was another typical move from the progressives. Another tearing down of George Washington's statue kind of thing. Usually, the left obliged, pretty much on a weekly basis.

It was only recently that they hadn't been so cooperative. 'C'mon, do something stupid,' he found himself saying. Don't become reasonable all of a sudden. Keep being progressively progressive, damn the results.

In other words, stay woke or Uncle Roger goes broke.

He had to smile at the rhyme. Not bad, he thought. Almost as good as the theme line he helped create for his network.

The Truth. Truthfully Told.

The gullibility of people, my god. If you repeat it enough, they will somehow fucking believe it. Whomever said that you can't fool all of the people all of the time obviously lived in an age before social media.

SEVEN

It wasn't easy being Warren Holt.

Most people have a hard time understanding how that could be. When you are the fifth richest person in the world, you have no right to complain that life is hard or unfair. Wouldn't that kind of money allow you to buy anything you want? Which most would assume includes an easy life. And/or happiness.

If only.

He knew that by starting the Betterment Alliance and bringing in Nicholas Becket to somehow come up with an ad campaign that would create this thing called hope, would open him up to criticism. Not only from those who liked him but also from those who didn't. The latter probably being the larger number. After all, you don't get to be worth a hundred billion or so without making a lot of enemies.

And unfortunately, once he was exposed as the man behind the money, it would be all the bad that he had done that would be brought up. The criticism would be unrelenting as to how he made his riches on the backs of others.

Which, of course, he did. Because that's how it was fucking done. Capitalism isn't church. You want to save souls, believe in God. If you want to make money, your God is capitalism.

Ah, yes, capitalism. If asked, he'd have to say that capitalism has served him well. Was he guilty of trespassing against others? Of course. But his rationale (funny how those in his stratosphere of wealth always have rationalizations) was that his actions were not as egregious as some that he knew. In fact, he would argue that he was much more conscientious than most

in his orbit. As if that would matter or make any difference to those who didn't breathe his rarefied air.

As for hope, well, what he told Nicholas was based on fact. If the world continued to lose hope, he and his businesses would most certainly lose money. The world would basically shut down, turn off, go dark. Hopeless people, after all, aren't usually in the mood to buy. So, no, he wasn't being altruistic by trying to create hope.

But neither was he being completely honest when he told Nicholas why he was doing it.

It wasn't *just* because he didn't like losing money. He was doing it because he didn't like losing. Period.

And right now, it was as if he were losing to his wealthy friends. Creating a colony on Mars, orbiting the world in your own rocket, hell, he couldn't be first with either of those now, could he? And that certainly took away bragging rights at Davos when the high-rollers would tout their accomplishments to each other over cocktails.

So, how could he be first at something? Something grandiose and different? Something most would think of as undoable.

Truth be told, that's why he came up with the Betterment Alliance. That's why he brought in Nicholas Beckett. To assuage his ego. To be able to brag. And if by doing so, he was seen as being altruistic, all the better.

He knew that creating hope would not seem as sexy as rocket ships or alternative universes. But when the history books were written, it could make him appear as the wise one, the caring one. If done right, his actions would be seen as an act of philanthropy, at least that's how he would tell his PR team to message it. But in reality, hope was his own little toy, his own little bauble, a massage for his ego.

Nothing more.

The question was, could he handle the criticism before the history books were written? Could he handle the sneers and the jeers from those who would ask who the hell did he think he was—trying to bring hope to the world?

Because yes, the critics would be out in droves. Their knives would be sharpened. Their axes honed.

Could he take it? He thought so. But you never know, do you? You never really know until the first cut happens. Until you see blood. And you realize that it's yours.

EIGHT

“Fog lifted yet?”

“No, not yet,” replied Anthony, turning away from the window that looked out over the Golden Gate Bridge. They were in Nicholas’s condo, where they had been working for the last six days. Well, you could call it working. They still hadn’t come up with a good idea.

Wandering over to the couch, Anthony picked up a football that was lying on the coffee table and stretched out.

The problem they were facing was trying to come up with 30 great minutes of advertising. Coming up with a halfway decent 30-second commercial is difficult enough. (Anyone who’s watched TV recently could probably attest to that.) But here they were trying to create thirty consecutive minutes of advertising where each minute continues the story throughout the Super Bowl. Suffice it to say that they were as lost as anyone trying to find their way through the fog that had currently socked in the city.

Although never mentioned, they both knew why they were struggling. People watch Super Bowl commercials to be entertained, not lectured to. If they were overly serious with what they were saying, it would all backfire. People would say they ruined the game. But doing the opposite, being light-hearted, how could they do that with something as serious as the world losing hope?

Sure, some people—those in the ad business mainly—might get off on the audaciousness of an ongoing story that ran over the course of the entire game. But most of the real world would be pissed off. And the real world is who they were trying to reach. The nerve of some rich company buying the

entire Super Bowl, that would become the story, not what the commercials were trying to say.

Anthony was lying on the couch, tossing the football up in the air and catching it. As he was about to toss it up one more time, he paused. "You know what I think? I think we need to lower our sights, Nicholas. Maybe instead of buying every fucking spot, what if we just bought one minute of ad time per quarter? That would be four minutes that we need to create. A lot easier than thirty."

Nicholas couldn't argue. "No shit, man."

"But even with four minutes, Nic, I gotta be honest with you, I still don't know what the fuck we're trying to say."

"Still?"

"Yeah, still. I mean hope comes through some action, or some *thing*. We both agree on that, right? That it needs to exist in *something*. Something tangible. Something people can see is actually creating a difference."

"Well, I think Holt would say that *thing* is the Betterment Alliance."

"Yeah, I know. But the Betterment Alliance means fuck all to anybody." Anthony tossed the football up again, but as it came down he fumbled it out of his reach. Sitting up, he paused.

"You know, since we're talking about the Super Bowl, here's an analogy. Take a football team. The team sucks. Nobody gives the team any hope in hell of having a good season. And then, out of the blue, they sign a great player. Let's say a star quarterback. And then another good player. What happens? All of a sudden, people start to say, 'You know what, maybe'. The new players offer hope for the team and its fans. Now here's the funny thing. Hope inspires confidence in the others on the team. Kind of like it's contagious. They start playing harder, better. They get a win here. A win there. Winning creates even

more confidence. The team starts to realize that they have a chance. I mean, the hope becomes real with the star players coming to the team. That's the tangible act. The *thing*. That's what created the hope. You can't just say let's hope we win this year. You have to create hope by actually fucking doing something."

Nicholas nodded. He liked the way that Anthony always tried to explain the complicated in the most human of terms. But he was right. What they were missing was the star player or some other action that would not only create change but also show people that change was indeed possible.

"Can't say you're wrong. I mean, yes, we need to show people that change can happen..."

"There's a 'but' in there someplace, isn't there?" smiled Anthony.

"...but the problem is, anyone who tries to change the way the game is played, especially in Washington, is immediately bought off. Besides, everyone in the Beltway is already making too much fucking money to have any desire to change the status quo."

"So, what if we outbid them?"

"Outbid who?"

"Outbid those who are paying to keep the status quo, the status quo."

When Nicholas didn't laugh at this suggestion, Anthony started to. "You know I was just kid..."

Nicholas cut him off. "No, no, wait..."

"I mean, I was just thinking out loud and..."

"How much do we have to spend again?" asked Nicholas.

"You told me five billion."

"Yes, yes, I did. What do you think? I mean that much would buy a lot of senators."

“What are you saying, Nicholas? Bribe them? I mean, lobbyists and big companies are already doing that.”

“In private, yes.”

“Because that’s how it’s done. I mean, it’s done in private because everyone thinks it’s kind of sleazy.”

“So, what if we did it differently? Say bribe them in public.”

It’s funny when you’re working with someone you trust and an idea hits. A silence comes over the room, not for long, maybe just two, three, four seconds. Just enough time for the synapses of both brains to get on the same page.

“Shit,” Anthony said as a big grin started to spread across his face.

“Yeah, I know,” said Nicholas, it’s crazy but...”

“Crazy is good. Crazy is good. I mean if an idea ain’t a little bit crazy, it has no chance of breaking through.”

Together, they continued to brainstorm the idea back and forth. This was their process. To try and punch holes in the thinking. To figure out why it can’t work.

First, they went back to the reasons why people are giving up hope. They decided to start with a potentially big problem, climate change. The reason people were giving up hope that any solutions would be found is because it was out of their hands, bigger than they were. Sure, individuals can do small things like recycle, protest, sign petitions, drive electric vehicles. All those made people *feel* better. But in reality, that alone is not going to solve the problem.

The climate is warming too quickly for small gestures to work. That’s why big solutions are needed. Today. Not ten years from now. To combat climate change, what was needed was someone, a star quarterback, if you will,

somebody or some sort of buy-in from someone whose actions might actually make a difference.

“It’s legislation that needs to change,” said Anthony. “And the way our political parties are polarized, that’s not going to happen anytime soon.”

“So let me ask you this,” said Nicholas. “Why do politicians vote the way they do on certain issues?”

“Supporting the will of their constituents. At least that’s how it’s supposed to work.”

“Supposed to, yes. But we both know their votes are predominantly influenced by the dollar. Whichever lobbying group pays them more, that’s where their vote is going. We’ve been told more than once that, off the record, if you talk to a politician privately, they don’t believe any of the crap they are saying publicly. But they can’t take the financial hit to say what they really believe out loud.”

“So what you’re saying is that it’s all based on greed.”

Walking over to a bookshelf, Nicholas started scanning the titles. Finding what he was looking for, he pulled a book off the shelf and tossed it over to Anthony.

“Ever read anything by this guy?”

Catching the book, Anthony took a look at the cover. “Who is it?”

“P.J. O’Rourke?”

Anthony read the title out loud. “Parliament of Whores. Yep. Loved this when I read it. Thought it was a fitting title for describing Washington. But I don’t think PJ ever looked at hope as a pillar of politics.”

“But he does say cash is.”

“That he does.

“And stay on this whore thing with me for a moment. Remember the old parable, the one where a man tells a woman that he will pay her an exorbitant sum of money to sleep with him? Once she accepts, he starts to renegotiate and offers her much less. Shocked and offended, she says, ‘What kind of woman do you think I am?’ The man smiles. ‘I believe that we’ve already established that,’ he says. ‘Now we’re just haggling over price.’”

Anthony laughed as he reread the title. “Parliament of Whores. So you’re saying P.J. was right. Politicians and prostitutes have a lot in common. They’re all whores.”

“Yep. And right now we’re just haggling over price.”

“And you’re suggesting that we do this so-called haggling out in the open, through advertising?”

“Yep. We need to offer them more money publicly, over the table, than what they are now making privately, under the table.”

Anthony could only shake his head. “Like I said man, it’s a crazy idea. And I like it, I do. But there’s gotta be a god-zillion laws against doing something like that.”

“Probably. But...what if there weren’t?”

“And you’re still talking Super Bowl?”

“Why not? It’s the biggest venue. And you’re the one who’s always said, if you’re gonna crash and burn, do it on the biggest fucking stage you can find.”

Anthony smiled as he stood up to go look out the window. The fog was starting to lift.

“C’mon,” he said, grabbing his coat. “I don’t know about you, but all this thinking has made me hungry.”

NINE

The Republican Party was standing firm. They were the minority in the Senate with only forty-two Republicans versus fifty-eight Democrats. And since the Vice-President was also a Democrat, it was really forty-two to fifty-nine when it came to any votes. In other words, they were badly outnumbered. The only thing going in their favor was the filibuster.

Any bill brought up by the Democrats would be filibustered by the Republicans. This meant that the Dems would need to scrounge up 60 votes to pass anything important. By standing firm, the Republicans knew the Dems would always be one vote short. If someone in the Republican Party flipped, the GOP would be screwed.

That was something they vowed as a party to never let happen. Which is why it didn't really matter what an individual Republican Senator believed, the vote was always for Party. Go against that and you could expect any Super PAC money that used to come your way to stop flowing.

Money is the world's most effective aphrodisiac, allowing people to rationalize even their worst behavior.

Regardless of what an individual Republican Senator truly wanted, the direction from the top was to vote party. If they didn't, they'd be primaried. And if they were primaried, chances were great that they would lose their next election.

This tended to assuage any guilt feelings they might have when they would vote against what they consciously knew was right. That's, of course, if any of them still had a conscience.

It was this steadfast unanimity of the Republican Party that was killing any hope that change could happen. Even when nationwide polls indicated that the majority of voters were clamoring for specific things to change. The politicians whom people thought might have a conscience, who were voted in because they campaigned on having morals and principles, became very unconscious of their campaign promises once in office. Could everyone see the hypocrisy? Of course. Were the politicians ashamed when called out? They didn't appear to be. Showing shame was considered a weakness that would prevent you from becoming a successful politician. Such a weakness could never be revealed.

So Anthony and Nicholas went to work trying to create a crack in that wall of GOP resolve. On the big issues, they only needed one Republican to change their vote. It would take some money, probably a lot of money. But hell, if the amount of money was large enough then the premise was the same as for the prostitute in the parable.

That they were for sale was already established. All they would be doing was negotiating price.

The Federal Election Committee has some dos and don'ts when it comes to bribery. For example, you can't attempt to buy off a politician directly; the Federal Election Committee has some hard and fast rules against that. But as far as contributions to a Super PAC went, there were almost no rules around that. This was all thanks to *Citizens United*, the ruling handed down by the Supreme Court in 2010. What *Citizens United* basically said was that corporations are people and should be treated as such. Since the Supreme Court ruled that people could contribute as much as they want, *Citizens United* removed any reasonable campaign contribution limits from corporations. They still couldn't give unlimited amounts of money *directly* to a politician. Not

even individuals can do that. But indirectly—through a Super PAC that was supporting a certain politician, the Supreme Court, in their infinite wisdom—saw no problem with unlimited dollars going to that. In other words, *Citizen's United* turned corporate campaign contributions into a form of legalized bribery. This immediately opened the door to a small group of wealthy donors and special interest groups using so-called dark money to influence the votes of legislators through Super PACS.

According to *Citizens United*, this is how the FEC defines a Super PAC:

Super PACs are independent expenditure-only political committees that may receive unlimited contributions from individuals, corporations, labor unions and other political action committees for the purpose of financing independent expenditures and other independent political activity. The committee will not use those funds to make contributions, whether direct, in-kind or via coordinated communications, to federal candidates or committees.

It was this part—*financing independent expenditures without coordinated communications to federal candidates or committees*—that Anthony and Nicholas focused their attention on. What they had to figure out was how they could stay distanced from the politicians and still more or less bribe them. Obviously, this meant that they couldn't name names publicly. If Senator A does this, we'll pay him or her millions of dollars, sort of thing. No, that would be illegal.

Instead, they had to find a way to float the idea of money being available and then let the vultures, i.e., the politicians, fight over the carcasses of cash.

“It could actually be kind of fun,” said Anthony, chuckling to himself. “I wonder how much it would take to see them shit all over themselves?”

Of course, the amount, or how much, was the million-dollar question. They had already decided that the first vote they would try to influence would be the proposed upcoming climate change legislation. It was legislation that, at least according to the polls, over 70% of the country wanted to move forward on. Even so, every Republican Senator was still voting no. Currently, it was being filibustered.

As to the question of how much it would take, obviously, it would need to be more than what the Senators were currently getting from the gas and oil companies to kill the legislation.

What was surprising, at least to Anthony and Nicholas, was that those numbers are publicly known. A little research led them to the amounts they were looking for. Senator so and so was making around \$600,000. Another was pocketing just under that from the oil and gas lobbies.

Their first thought was to go just a bit higher than the highest amount. But since this was going to be a public bribe, they realized that for a politician to switch alliances, it would have to be for an amount that no one, not really, could fault them for.

Which is why when Anthony suggested \$1 million, Nicholas shook his head no. “I think it needs to be even higher. I think maybe something like \$10 million.”

“Ten million? Jesus,” said Anthony.

“All brought to you by the Betterment Alliance.”

“It’s a fucking crazy idea,” said Anthony.

“Glad you like it,” replied Nicholas.

Anthony had to smile. Nicholas was right. The great advertising ideas were the ones that when people first saw them, their response was, “No way. You can’t do that.”

And yet when they did do *just* that, and it worked, everyone would always come around. “I always knew it was brilliant,” they would chime in.

“So I guess there’s only one question left,” said Anthony. “Will Warren Holt buy it?”

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders. “All I know is that he promised me that whatever we come up with, he would buy it. Or, not. What he wouldn’t do is change it. He’d be either 100% in or 100% out.”

“Can’t ask for more than that,” said Anthony.

“Should I set up a meeting?”

“Shit. Why the hell not? Best to find out if we’re barking up the wrong tree before we start barking too loud.”

TEN

Nicholas was escorted into the same expansive room that they had met in the first time. He came alone as both he and Anthony thought that would be best, allowing Warren Holt to focus on the idea and not a new player on the team.

Warren Holt was in the back of the room at the bar, pouring himself a Scotch. Seeing Nicholas enter, he held up the decanter, "May I offer you one, Nicholas?"

"Later, maybe." Nicholas smiled. "Depends on what you think of the idea."

Warren walked over to the same four leather chairs where they had sat before and sat down.

"I was wondering when I would hear from you. Or, even if I would hear from you. Please sit."

Nicholas sat down in the chair across from Holt. "It took a while to solve the problem."

Warren Holt looked surprised. "To create hope? Really? You found it difficult? And here I believe that I create hope every day for my employees."

Smug little bastard, isn't he, thought Nicholas to himself. Knowing that Holt wanted him to ask how he did it, Nicholas obliged .

"I pay them a salary," Holt replied without a trace of irony.

Nicholas stared at him curiously. "Interesting...so am I to take from that statement that in your opinion, it's money that buys hope?"

Warren Holt didn't miss a beat. "Versus what, Nicholas? I told you when we first met that I'm not an idealist. I'm a realist. And as a realist, and a rather wealthy one at that, I understand better than most what money can do. Do I

really believe that hope comes through the good conscience and will of the people? Seriously? I mean, do you?”

“Maybe, I don’t know, for some people, probably, yes. But I do think it’s interesting that you think money can buy you anything you want.”

Warren Holt gestured at the room they were in and then back at Nicholas. “It always has.” Again, without a trace of irony.

Behind him, Nicholas heard a door quietly open. Turning, he saw a woman enter the room. She was dressed in a pencil skirt, suit jacket, and heels. Her hair was black as night, her figure trim. She wore her hair up, glasses resting on the top of her head, a yellow notepad in her hand. Nicholas guessed she was in her early thirties. Without saying a word, she sat down in one of the remaining leather chairs between the two men and crossed her legs.

An action that was difficult for Nicholas not to notice.

“Let me introduce my lawyer, Logan Jamison. She is the only other person who will be involved in this. I find it wise to always get her opinion before I commit to spending the amount of money that you and I talked about earlier. After all, I don’t want to spend, well, at least *that* type of money, on anything illegal. I take it you don’t mind?”

Nicholas shook his head no as he found himself staring at the woman. A beautiful woman in a business meeting. No, he didn’t mind at all.

She noticed him staring. “Yes?” she asked Nicholas.

Caught flat-footed, Nicholas had to scramble. “Uh, your name—um, Logan?” he stammered. “Unusual for a woman.”

“Scottish. Only child. My father wanted a boy,” she said.

Nicholas nodded. “I see.”

“So,” Warren Holt cut in, sitting back and making himself comfortable in his chair. “Now that everyone here knows everyone, share with me, Nicholas, how in the hell does one use the creativity of advertising to create hope in a world where it is so sorely lacking?”

ELEVEN

“What did he say? What did he say?”

Anthony told Nicholas to call him as soon as the meeting was over. Nicholas was in Holt’s limo heading back to Holt’s private jet when he put the call through. Reaching in front of him, Nicholas shut the divider separating him from the driver as Anthony answered.

“I think he bought it,” said Nicholas.

“Think? Or, know? Which is it?”

“Okay, he bought it.”

“You’re kidding. Really? No shit?”

Usually, when Nicholas presented a creative idea to a client, the idea would be completely fleshed out. There would be scripts, storyboards (visuals that show how the idea will look on TV or online), a whole song and dance to be performed in front of the client to help achieve the sale. What Nicholas did different this time was that he came in with nothing but the seed of an idea. What he wanted to accomplish with this meeting was to see if Warren Holt would be even open to such an approach. Once he said yes, if he said yes, then he and Anthony would take the time to flesh it out properly.

Which is why when he started to explain the idea, he went slowly. The first time he used the word ‘bribe’ was the first time that Logan Jamison, the lawyer, jumped in.

“Excuse me, but I did hear you just say the word bribe, did I not?” she asked.

“You did.”

“You want us to bribe a politician?” she continued, baffled by the thought. “Publicly? On TV? In a commercial? Ha! You do realize that there is something called Federal Campaign Finance Law, don’t you?”

Nicholas couldn’t help but catch the sarcasm in Logan’s voice. But then again, he was used to sarcasm from clients. When clients resorted to sarcasm, it usually meant the idea scared them. Which, to Nicholas, meant that it was pretty fucking good.

“Heard of it, yeah,” Nicholas said nonchalantly. “Looked the finance law up online, actually. But as for bribery in Washington, it’s really nothing new. In my opinion, it’s what’s being done now, only in the shadows. I’m just saying that instead of hiding it, we should be upfront about it. Bring it out into the open.”

Logan Jamison’s look went from sarcastic to exasperated. “It’s done privately to avoid the Federal Campaign Finance Law.” She didn’t add the words ‘you fucking idiot’ to the end of her sentence, but she didn’t need to. It still came through loud and clear.

Turning to her boss, she continued. “I don’t think, Warren, that we...”

Warren Holt held up his hand. “Let’s let him finish, Logan,” he said, cutting her off. “I understand your concern, but I don’t think Nicholas is stupid. He paused, looking at Nicholas before continuing with a slight smile. “Are you Nicholas?”

“Probably depends on whether you ask my ex-wife or not,” smiled Nicholas. “But in this case, I think not. We’ve done a lot of research...”

Again, he was cut off by the lawyer. “And by ‘we’ you mean..?”

“I’m working with a creative partner.”

“And by research...?”

“As I said, online.”

“Oh great. Two creative guys playing like they are online Perry Masons. That should work.”

“Now, now, Logan, again I say let him finish,” said Warren Holt, nodding for Nicholas to continue.

Nicholas looked at Logan. She was not only beautiful, but smart and biting. A dangerous combination.

“The campaign finance laws you mentioned are all spelled out online. In our opinion, they are rather porous and enforced loosely. Especially when it comes to outlining exactly what a Super PAC can and can’t do. We will follow all the rules to the letter of the law—as it is currently written—in regards to Super PACS.”

Warren Holt nodded. “I know a bit about Super PACS. I know that they can’t directly contribute to a politician or party. I know that politicians are getting around that by doing something called ‘red-boxing’ on their websites.

Nicholas interrupted him. “Sorry, red-boxing?”

“Logan, why don’t you explain?” said Warren.

“Red-boxing is where a politician puts some information on their website and draws a red line around it, boxing it in. This info might talk about skeletons that their opponent may not want revealed, or media suggestions as to how best attack their opponent. This info is not, quote/unquote, directly given to a Super PAC. But every Super PAC knows how to look at a politician’s site and see what they’ve outlined in red so as to understand what it is that they want the PAC to spend the money on.”

Nicholas nodded. “So, like I said, the campaign finance laws are enforced laxly.”

“Apparently so,” said Warren. “But back to your proposal, Nicholas. You said that you wanted to bribe a politician. And to do it publicly. I would imagine the same amount of money would need to be spent whether I publicly, or privately, bribe or buy them. Am I right?”

That part was true, and Nicolas’ shoulder shrug indicated as much. But he also knew that Holt wasn’t yet seeing the big picture. Before he could say anything, Warren Holt continued.

“So then, why not do it privately? Like it’s currently being done. Then there wouldn’t be any public scrutiny. Or,”... he looked over at Logan...“to Logan’s concern, legal ramifications.”

Nicholas held up two fingers. “Two reasons,” he said. “The first is what everyone already knows. That everything today is done under the table with what they call dark money. This has not only allowed the moral authority that used to exist within our political institutions to fall apart, but in fact, to become non-existent.”

Logan Jamison started to roll her eyes. Why was this guy wasting their time with things everyone already knew?

“And, so?” said Warren.

“And so, to build back this compromised structural integrity, our belief is that we must reveal it to be the sham that it is.”

“And you think bribing politicians in public will do this?”

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders again, indicating yes.

“Your job wasn’t to build back the structural integrity of the political system of the United States.” Warren Holt was a little miffed. “Your job, through advertising, was to create hope and...”

This time, Nicholas cut him off. “If you remember, I said *two* reasons. So if I may continue...”

Logan looked over at her boss to catch his reaction. Most people didn't dare to talk back to him this way.

"Please, by all means," Warren said somewhat condescendingly. Seeing that his glass was empty, he debated refilling it, but chose instead to place it down on the table between them.

"Because if we don't go public, then I wouldn't be fulfilling the assignment," said Nicholas. "The assignment that you just mentioned."

Warren Holt looked up at him curiously.

"The assignment to create hope throughout the world."

"I'm afraid I'm not following," said Warren.

"It's the nature of hope," said Nicholas. "What it is. How it exists. If you privately buy off politicians to change the way they vote on a certain issue, say on climate change, yes, the results could well be the same, whether private or public. Then you privately pay a bunch of other politicians to change the way they vote on some other big issue, say like immigration, or guns, or abortion, or whatever. Yes, over time, change would happen. But the people, the public, the world, wouldn't know that something was going on, that there was someone or something behind this change. They would just think that some politician had all of a sudden grown a pair."

Logan smiled at the analogy. Her reaction was subtle, but it caused Nicholas to wonder if she liked it or just considered him to be an unsophisticated shit.

"You see, hope can't exist in a vacuum. It has to be anchored in reality. A clear vision needs to be presented to offer a path that people can go down to get past the apathy they are feeling. Everyone already knows that politicians are being paid under the table to act and vote in a certain way. It's common knowledge, and yet we just all accept that this is the way that politics now

works. What the people haven't had, up to now, is a someone or something, a Lone Ranger type of thing—using your analogy from the first time we met—who was willing to pony up and *get* politicians to vote their conscience. You," said Nicholas, pointing to Warren, "or in this case, the Betterment Alliance, are that thing that people can start to have faith in. The thing they can put their hope in. But for that to happen, it can't be under the table. It needs to be visible. It needs to be public."

"So the Betterment Alliance is the chalice, the vessel, the urn that holds the hope," said Warren.

Nicholas nodded. "More or less, yeah."

"What do the Republicans say?" Warren Holt winked at Logan as he continued..."The only way to stop a bad man with money is a good man with money?"

Nicholas had to smile. "I think they were referring to guns, but yeah, something like that."

"Of course, whether I'm good or not could certainly be argued, but..." he turned to Logan... "thoughts, Logan?"

She was staring at Nicholas, seizing him up. "I don't claim to be creative," she said. "I'm about legalities. And while I still don't understand exactly how it can be done legally, if it can, and that is still a big if, then I think I do understand the logic that Mr Beckett just expressed and would have to agree with his theory as to how, and why, hope exists."

Warren looked from Logan to Nicholas. His fingers were tapping on the armrest of his chair. He was mentally considering the options, coming to a decision. Finally, he spoke.

"As would I. By showing that change is actually possible, that progress can actually be made, then people can start to feel hope that something is

being done and that the future can indeed be different than the present. I can see that. The argument makes sense. And I, probably better than most, understand the power that money has in this equation. Yes, yes, it's not what I was expecting, but it is, in its own way, interesting. So I imagine that you have a campaign to show us how you plan on going about publicly bribing some of our outstanding politicians."

Nicholas shook his head no. "Don't have it. Not yet. But when we do, I'll run it by you and Ms Jamison here, of course. But because it is such an unusual approach, I wanted you to buy into the thinking first."

"And what you're saying is that if we can get politicians—congressmen or Senators—to change their vote on one issue, then that same logic, this bribery strategy, would get them to change their vote regarding legislation on other things?"

"It's a hypothesis, yes. But I think that with enough money, it would work on anything that politicians are currently not allowing to happen."

"It appears, Nicholas, as if part of you wants to unveil the hypocrisy of the political system for all to see. Apparently, you have a lower regard for the integrity of politicians than I do. And since I have purchased a few in the past, all under the so-called table, of course, you probably understand that my level of regard is quite low.

"Imagined as much. But I think that when it comes to the power of money, we are in agreement. The way I'm looking at it is that greed basically got us into this mess, so it seems to make sense that it will take greed to get us out of it."

"So, let me ask the elephant in the room question," said Logan. "What kind of money do you think we are talking about here?"

Nicholas had expected that question would be asked, so he came ready with an answer.

“It will need to be more than what politicians are currently being paid under the table. Perhaps a lot more. If we’re talking climate change legislation, from what we have been able to find out online is that the most the fossil fuel companies are paying a single politician is just under a million.”

“So we go a million?” the lawyer asked as if it were a rhetorical question.

Nicholas shook his head. “I think we need to be even more outrageous for this to work and create the impact that we want. Remember, it will be a public bribe, so we need to go really high if it’s going to sway a politician.”

“So you’re thinking what then?” asked Logan.

“Ten million,” replied Nicholas.

A small whistle emanated from her lips. She turned to object to her boss, but he was already shaking his head.

“No. I don’t think so,” Warren said, with a shake of his head. Logan let out a sigh of relief. Good. She wasn’t the only one who thought the figure outrageous.

“I think that’s too low. Way too low. I think we should start at thirty mil.”

Now it was Nicholas’ turn to whistle.

Warren Holt was rubbing his hands together as he continued. “I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of something, no, you probably haven’t, something called the grifter’s protocol?”

Nicholas was shaking his head. “You’re right. I haven’t.”

“You see, the fact is, Nicholas, we’re all grifters. Especially those in my orbit. We all get seduced by the shining, glittery object just out of our reach. That’s what the grifter’s protocol is based on. It’s an understanding that if you want to grift a grifter, then you need to go big. So fucking big that they start to

salivate, thinking that they can't afford *not* to bite. Big money is an extremely seductive, shiny object. It's why most are not immune to its charms. Oh, they know it might cost them. They know it's risky. But by God, if the amount is enticing enough, they too, will be blinded to the obvious red flags. They'll take the bait. Thirty million will do that. Ten mil, not so sure."

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders. "It's coming from your wallet," he said, gesturing towards Warren. "You can obviously spend as much as you like."

"Yes, I can. And so, I will. But correct me if I'm wrong, Nicholas. From what I'm hearing, it seems that this campaign you're proposing, bribing our country's politicians, it sounds as if it's just U.S.-based. As you know, my companies are worldwide. To continue to be successful, I need you to create hope across the world."

Nicholas nodded. "Yeah, I know. But we needed to start someplace. Our thinking is that if it works here, I mean, a politician's pretty much a politician no matter what country in the world you're talking about. If I remember correctly, that's what you told me the first time we met."

"Yes, yes, I did. I did say that greed is universal. So your theory is that as the U.S. goes, so goes the world?"

"I think if the U.S. sets an example, people from other countries will know it's possible and will follow our example."

"Not sure if I agree with that. But we won't know if we don't try, will we? Okay, I buy it. We start here, in this country, with our politicians, and see what happens. I like it. It's ballsy. It's unexpected. It's different."

"I think different is a bit of an understatement," said Logan.

Nicholas couldn't stifle his laugh.

"Something funny?" asked Warren.

“It’s just that usually those three adjectives—ballsy, unexpected, different—that’s what scares most clients off.”

Warren Holt smiled. “I hope you’re finding, Nicholas, that I’m not like most clients. I say let’s do it. Stay close to Logan on the executions. If she’s okay with it from a legal perspective, then, as you and I agreed earlier, I don’t need to see it. I promised that I would trust you completely on the creative side. And I will.”

Looking at his watch, Warren got up to leave. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m supposed to be on a call with the Saudis. Logan, you know where the Scotch is, if Nicholas does decide to change his mind.”

Back in the car, Anthony was listening to Nicholas as he finished replaying the meeting over the phone. “And that was it?”

“Pretty much.”

“Jesus. We’re actually going to do this?”

“Looks like.”

“Fuck me.”

“Yeah. And fuck us if we fuck it up.”

TWELVE

Well, they do say the rich are different.

That was the first thing Anthony thought when Nicholas told him the amount they were going to offer was thirty million, versus the ten that the two of them had suggested.

“Fuck me. Thirty friggin’ million. Jesus. You know something? I still can’t believe that we have total control over this \$5 billion budget, Nicholas.”

They were once again back at Nicholas’ place, working on the campaign. “I mean, this is so weird. It’s like giving the kids the keys to the candy store.”

And it was. Creatives are never put in charge of the advertising budget. Nobody in the history of advertising has ever adequately explained why. But then again, nobody has ever had to. Everyone just assumes that creatives would spend it all on booze and lunch. And they’re probably not altogether wrong.

But if you look at the failure rate of most ad campaigns running today, some will argue that 87% of all advertising is ignored completely—perhaps giving creatives a little more control over how the money is spent wouldn’t be such a bad idea. It certainly isn’t working the way it is.

Nicholas could rationalize spending \$30 million on the so-called bribe campaign because an amount that large would get so much attention and make so much noise it meant they would have to actually spend less in media. This was a truism often overlooked in the ad business—something that he had explained to both Warren Holt and Logan Jamison at their meeting. The more unique the campaign or commercial, the more it stands out, the less it needs to air because people tend to notice it the first time it runs. And, if you are good enough to craft what you say so that it has some actual importance to the

viewers who see it, then you don't have to say it more than once. A famous San Francisco adman put it this way, 'How many times do you have to be told that your house is on fire?'

A thirty-million dollar bribe would come across as similar to being told that your house is going up in flames. It would not only attract the right people's attention, it would do so immediately. And it wouldn't have to run often. The infrequently discussed truth is that it's only conventional advertising that needs the enormous media budgets to achieve any type of traction.

That said, Anthony and Nicholas did want the largest initial audience for their launch. Which is why Nicholas had also mentioned the Super Bowl in his meeting to Holt and Jamison. They both liked the idea.

Calling a media guy he knew, Nicholas asked if any 30-second slots were still available for the big game. A few, he was told. He asked if it was possible to buy the spot at the start of the last two minutes of the first half—the two-minute warning—so to speak. That would give them the chance of getting people talking about the spot over half time.

"That will cost you more," he was told, "to specify placement during the game."

"How much more are we talking?" asked Nicholas.

"Thirty seconds are going for around eight mil. If you want to specify placement, add another mil."

"Done," said Nicholas. "Book it."

When he hung up, Nicholas felt a shiver run through him. Actually, it scared the shit out of him because now that they had bought the time, he and Anthony had to figure out a clever way to fill those 30 seconds.

What they did know is that most of the ads during the big game were funny, not serious. Theirs would be serious, serious as a heart attack, even if some people might think it was a joke when they saw it.

“The thing about the Super Bowl is that people actually pay attention to the ads,” said Nicholas. “Sometimes even more attention than to the game itself. In fact, the commercials are a big reason why a lot of people watch the game at all.”

“Yeah, so?”

“So...I was thinking that we need to keep it simple. Really simple. Maybe even as simple as an all-type ad. Something that people have to read.”

This took Anthony by surprise. “C’mon, it’s the Super Bowl, Nic. You know, big production budgets, celebrities. I mean, celebrities always get the best viewership on the Super Bowl. And we have enough fucking money to do anything. Any fucking thing we think will work. We should be thinking big, you know, with the money we have, hell, I mean, we can afford to hire Spielberg to do it. And here you’re saying all type. What is that shit? I mean, that would cost, what, like \$300 to produce?”

“Probably. But c’mon, Anthony, what have we always said, you and I, about advertising?” When Anthony just shrugged his shoulders, Nicholas continued. “Form follows function, right?”

“Yeah, so?”

“So tell me, what is the function of this commercial? What do we want people to say after seeing it?”

“I don’t know, I guess something like, ‘What the fuck? Did they just try to bribe a politician?’”

“Yeah, exactly. And what is the best way in which to communicate that than to just say it? To just bribe them. Directly. All words. In black and white.”

“Stop being so damn rational,” said Anthony. “We’re talking the fucking Super Bowl.”

“I know it. I know it. But you don’t want to have a celebrity say it because that would dilute the message. How much did they pay so and so to say that would be the first thing people would ask. And if we get someone like Spielberg to direct, then he becomes the story, not the message.

Anthony’s look said what he didn’t have to. Nicholas was right.

“And,” Nicholas continued, “if we do something that tries to explain how our government works and why it’s failing the American public, it would—”

“—sound too preachy and political, yeah, okay, got that. So you think that we should just what...say it and be done with it?”

“Yeah, but it’s still not going to be easy to word it correctly. I mean, with all the FEC regulations, it’s gonna be like walking through a fucking minefield.”

Anthony was nodding. “No shit,” he said, walking over to his jacket that he had thrown on the couch. Picking it up, he started putting it on.

“You know what we need?”

Nicholas looked over at him, a little hesitant to ask.

“A drink. C’mon, mate. It’s time to give our creative juices a little creative juicing.”

Nicholas couldn’t argue.

“But first,” Anthony smiled, “I’ve realized you haven’t told me much about this Logan chick yet, Nicholas.” Anthony was divorced, and with his longish hair and still boyish good looks, considered himself a bit of a player.

“She’s smart,” smiled Nicholas. “Real smart.”

“Cute?”

“In a lawyerly way, I guess, yeah.”

“Fuck-able?”

“By whose standards? As I seem to recall, yours aren’t exactly the highest these days.”

“Ouch,” Anthony winced. “Then just answer me this. Was she wearing a wedding ring?”

“I don’t know if I even looked.”

“Don’t give me that shit. A beautiful woman. Smart as well. Sure you looked.”

“Okay. Yeah, didn’t see one, no.”

“All I need to know, buddy,” smiled Anthony, rubbing his hands together. “Looking forward to meeting this lovely Logan. Always liked them smart.”

Nicholas could only shake his head. The only thing he was worried about was Logan fucking them.

THIRTEEN

Advertising lore has it that what some consider to be the best political commercial ever written—*Morning In America*—for Ronald Reagan’s re-election campaign was written in a bar in San Francisco with the help of a few bourbons.

In advertising lore, a lot of great work seems to come out of bars. (As for the commercial *Morning In America*, the folklore in this instance is true.) It could just be the nature of the beast. Or, the fact that every writer in the business wants to be like Hemingway. And that means drinking. But what is true is that most times, the best ideas *are* buried under the weight of rationality. If and when that weight gets too heavy, most creatives find a little juice doesn’t hurt in lightening the load and freeing the irrational mind.

Anthony and Nicholas each had taken two legal-size pads of paper to the bar. Already, a lot of those pages had been ripped out and balled up, discarded ideas littering the table next to the bottle of wine they were already more than halfway through. Anthony finally asked the woman serving them if she could bring a wastebasket over and leave it so that they could sweep the crumpled -up mess they had made into it.

“And oh, by the way, may as well bring another bottle of this,” he said, emptying what was left in the bottle into his glass before handing it to her.

“Thirty million,” said Anthony, shaking his head, “it still seems so wrong to give thirty million to a politician. Just to get them to do what they already know is right. I thought that when you paid that much money, it was to get someone to do something illegal.”

Nicholas found that funny. Maybe because he couldn’t disagree with it. In fact, no one could disagree with it. Bribes are usually associated with so-

called nefarious deeds, to get someone to turn a blind eye or to bend a rule. The only rule they would be breaking here would be in bribing a politician to actually vote their conscience. Of course, to some, that too, would be seen as an underhanded deed.

They knew that whatever they came up with would have to be run by Logan Jamison. Anthony suggested that they fly her out to San Francisco. That way, they could go over the idea in person, two against one. Yeah, right. Nicholas knew that Anthony had already tried to look her up online. But there wasn't much there. Unusual these days. That only intrigued him even more.

"Having met her, I think that she's going to be a stickler," said Nicholas.

"Leave that to me," smiled Anthony.

He was a confident son-of-a-bitch, Nicholas had to give him that. And in a way, he had always admired that about Anthony. His cockiness and assuredness around women. It was one trait that he, himself, didn't possess. Sell an idea to a client, no problem, that he could do. Confidently. But sell *himself*, no, not likely. That was one thing he was never good at.

The second bottle of Pinot arrived along with the wastebasket. Nicholas and Anthony quickly slid the sheets of crumpled-up paper into the wastebasket, freeing some space on the table, and they hoped, in their minds. They understood that it was all part of the process when trying to come up with an idea. You write and write and write and write and then write some more. You're not looking for perfect, not in this stage, no. What you're doing is trying to empty the shit out of your head to somehow make a little bit of room so that brilliance can find a way in. Experience had taught Nicholas that it's the unconscious that comes up with the really good ideas. Everything you write and throw away frees up space and allows the unconscious mind to slip up another rung of the ladder to where the answer actually lies. That's why you

write and write and write and then, fucking write some more. To clear out the junk and leave room, an opening, a window, for something great to find its way in.

Anthony was busy reminiscing about one of the great campaigns that the two of them did for a certain brand of beer, working as a team years ago, when he noticed that Nicholas' entire posture had changed. It wasn't just that Nicholas was no longer listening to what Anthony was saying. It was like his hand was flowing across the page of paper, completely disassociated from his brain. Anthony had seen that once, maybe twice, with Nicholas before. It was kind of scary actually, but he knew what it meant. And he knew that the worst thing he could do now was to intrude or interrupt. Quickly he shut the fuck up and watched as Nicholas' pen moved faster and faster, left to right, across the legal pad, as if it had a mind of its own.

Those in the creative field know what this is when they experience it. Not that it happens often, or ever for some, but when it does, it's as if you are no longer in your own body. The unconscious has not only found its way to the top of your mental ladder but, it has physically taken over. All you try to do is get out of the way of what your hand is trying to put down on paper. The mind is no longer in control. Your hand is just moving. It's like a foreign force has taken over and you're just an observer. If you tried to stop whatever was happening, you would lose whatever the unconscious was creating.

When his hand finally did come to a stop, Nicholas let out a sigh. And then looked up.

"I saw," said Anthony. He looked down at the yellow legal pad which Nicholas hadn't looked at yet.

"And?"

“You tell me,” said Nicholas, sliding the yellow pad over to him, still without looking at it, without reading it.

Slowly, Anthony took the pad and started to read. When he finished, he looked up at Nicholas. “Fuck me.”

“You think?”

Anthony could only nod. “I think if lawyer Logan lets this go and doesn’t fuck it up, it’s gonna cause the shitstorm that we want.”

Anthony slid the pad of paper back over to Nicholas, who tentatively read what his hand had written, only really seeing it now, for the first time.

He started to smile as he read it through again for the second time. “It’s good,” he said, almost sounding surprised. “Isn’t it? I mean, it’s good, right?”

Anthony nodded. “We need to double-check it against the campaign finance laws parameters, but yeah. I think it’s time we give that lawyer chick a call and tell her to get her firm, little ass on out here.”

FOURTEEN

Logan Jamison had booked a room at the Clift Hotel. The text she had sent to Nicholas told him to meet her at 7:00 that evening in The Redwood Room, the popular and somewhat toney bar on the ground floor of the Clift.

Of course, Nicholas invited Anthony to join them. “What’s with you?” he said when he saw Anthony walk up to the hotel. “What’s with me what?” replied Anthony. “You cleaned up,” Nicholas said with a grin. Anthony was wearing dark jeans, a white shirt, and a blazer.

“Important meeting,” smiled Anthony. “Yeah, right,” Nicholas nodded, slapping him on the back as they entered. He knew Anthony cleaned up his act for meeting Logan.

The Redwood Room is an institution in San Francisco, catering to those with money. Lots and lots of money. It is difficult not to feel glamorous when entering—the Art Deco wall sconces throw just the right amount of low light to hide any personal flaws, enhancing any appearance.

The original paneling in the room—if one is to believe the stories—was all sourced from a single redwood tree. Legend also has it that the bar, running almost the length of the room, was carved from a redwood tree that was 800 years old. The paintings that adorned the walls were from the Austrian painter, Gustav Klimt, adding to the room’s prestige.

“Sexy,” Anthony said to Nicholas as they walked in and looked around the room. “Just the way I like ‘em.”

Logan Jamison was sitting at one of the small tables off to one side, her back to the entrance. Even so, Nicholas had no trouble recognizing her immediately. Her jet-black hair, down this time instead of up, would make her

stand out anywhere. As did her entire demeanor. Without even knowing her, you would say that she belonged in a joint like this.

Pointing her out to Anthony, they walked over. “Don’t stand up,” said Nicholas when they reached the table.

She looked up at Nicholas with a curious glance. “Had no intention to,” she said, without a trace of a smile. She was wearing a snow-white turtleneck under a black leather jacket. Her leggings fit her like a second skin, and her boots stopped at the ankle, allowing just the hint of a tattoo to creep up over the top. Anthony found that he couldn’t stop staring. She certainly looked like no other lawyer he had ever met.

“My creative partner, Anthony Ridgeway,” said Nicholas. “Anthony, Logan Jamison.”

“Pleasure,” said Anthony, “truly,” as they shook hands. Silence in return.

“You stay in nice places,” said Nicholas, looking around the room as he and Anthony sat down, joining her at the small table.

“I’ve earned nice places,” said Logan, without a bit of irony in her voice. “I find they suit me.”

The server arrived to take their order. “Another scotch, Ms. Jamison?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you, Michael.”

“Why don’t you make it three, buddy?” chimed in Anthony.

Nicholas noticed a look of displeasure cross Logan’s face at the use of the word ‘buddy’ in a place like this. Just as quickly, it disappeared.

“So you asked me here to, I assume, show me the creative,” she said, looking at Nicholas the entire time. But before he could answer, Anthony jumped in.

“It’s a damn good idea. You’re going to like it. And may I call you Logan?”

She looked at him without answering his question. “I’m not here to judge the quality of your idea, Mr. Ridgeway—”

“Anthony, please,” smiled Anthony.

She continued as if she didn’t hear him. “—I’m just here to determine the legality of anything you decide to say.”

Their drinks arrived. As the server set them on the table, Logan flashed a smile that would make any man melt, “Thank you, Michael. And if you could do me a favor?” The waiter nodded with a familiarity that indicated that this would not be the first time that he had followed her wishes. “Make sure that we have a little privacy for a while. Perhaps seat any others who need a table... elsewhere,” she said, waving her hand to the other side of the room.

“Of course, Ms. Jamison. Whatever pleases you.”

“You certainly seem to have some clout here,” said Anthony.
“Impressive.”

“Apparently, you impress easily, Mr Ridgeway.”

“Anthony.”

“Yes, I know.” Turning towards Nicholas, she continued. “So, Nicholas, do you want to share your idea? I’m fascinated by how you think that we can publicly, and even more importantly—legally bribe a politician.”

Nicholas nodded. They had brought the script with them for the launch spot. But before they shared it, Nicholas walked Logan through their thinking behind running it at the two-minute warning break of the Super Bowl.

No comment.

Anthony then took her through the concept of the commercial being all type, no voice-over, no music, just a heartbeat from a drum in the background, the type scrolling up through the screen over 30 seconds.

Again, she had no comment.

Anthony, usually used to more opinionated clients, was clearly getting frustrated. "You really have nothing to say?" he asked.

Logan stared at him. "I trust you two are creative enough to know what will be effective. Mr. Holt wouldn't have hired you otherwise. The people that he works with are brilliant at what they do. Which is why he lets them do what they are good at without any interference. Nothing that you just told me has anything to do with legalities. So there is nothing for me to say, is there? But if it's now time to reveal the script, I have a hunch that's about to change."

Nicholas couldn't hold back a smile. Her last line came with a bit of sarcasm, he thought. But he, for one, appreciated her bluntness. Found it refreshing. Anthony, he could tell, wasn't so sure. Usually, his charm and looks had won over whatever female he was talking to at this point. When they didn't, he got confused and frustrated. Nicholas took the script out of the folder that he had placed on the table in front of him and handed it to her.

"Here you go. Now, like Anthony was saying, it will scroll..."

She put his hand on his arm, like a mother to a child, quieting him. "Yes, I got that."

Silently, she read. Nicholas looked at Anthony, who couldn't stop looking at Logan. Her face was granite as she perused the script, allowing no expression to escape.

Reaching for her scotch, she slowly took a sip, carefully putting the glass back down on the table before reaching into her bag, bringing out a sheet of paper.

"The federal campaign finance law," she said, indicating what was on the paper.

She then reread the script, checking against the piece of paper she had pulled out of her bag. When she finished, she handed the script back to Nicholas.

“You need to change two words.”

“Wait, wait, wait, wait...what do you mean change?” said Anthony. He always became quite defensive about clients changing anything; it was as if he took it personally. “I thought Holt said he wouldn’t change...”

Logan held up her hand, “Mr. Ridgeway...” He stopped.

“If you do change two words, it’s legal. If you don’t, it’s not. And if it’s not, it won’t run. Your choice.”

“Just like that? That’s it?” said Anthony.

“Yes. Just like that. You decide and let me know.” Leaning forward, she picked up her glass and finished the little bit that was left in it.

“Which two words?” asked Nicholas, holding the script out to her.

“Here and...here,” she said as she pointed.

Looking up at Anthony, Nicholas shrugged his shoulders, as if to say the changes would be doable, easy enough.

“Now, if you will excuse me,” continued Logan, “I have a dinner date. I assume that you don’t mind picking up the tab? And do treat our server, Michael, well,” she said, looking at how empty it was around where they were sitting. “He did do as I asked.”

“I would imagine that’s usually the case,” said Anthony under his breath.

“Excuse me?” said Logan, staring at Anthony.

“I said, have an unusually nice dinner,” said Anthony with a smile.

“I’m sure you did,” she said. “And I’m sure I will.” And with that, she stood up and left.

“What do you think?” Nicholas asked Anthony as she walked away. He couldn’t help but notice that Anthony refused to take her eyes off of her as she left the room. Which he saw was also true of most of the other men in the bar.

“What do I think?” smiled Anthony. “What do I think? Well, I thought it was pretty obvious. That girl is crazy about me.”

FIFTEEN

Due to the size of the audience, the Super Bowl is the most expensive commercial time available to buy on TV. How much more expensive is it? Normally, a national, prime-time, 30-second spot costs around \$100,000 to run. On the Super Bowl, that 30 seconds will cost you north of seven mil.

That's the reason why most advertisers like to release their commercials to the advertising publications and major news media outlets a week before the big game itself. This way, the spots become news in themselves, being picked up by the national media and seen and talked about before the kick-off even happens. Most advertisers think that this so-called 'free publicity' gives their commercial more bang for the buck. And when they're spending north of seven million for one thirty-second exposure, the bigger the bang, the better.

Anthony and Nicholas didn't see it that way. In their opinion, revealing the commercial *before* the game lessened the commercial's impact *during* the game itself. And what they were going for with this spot was maximum impact on game day.

During the Super Bowl, reviews of the commercials happen in real time while the game is going on. The platform known as 'X', of course, is full of people commenting. It seems that on Super Bowl Sunday, everyone suddenly becomes an advertising expert. Some ad publications have live, real-time 'pros', evaluating the commercials as they air. When Nicholas and Anthony's commercial ran right before the two-minute warning, the number of comments on 'X' increased exponentially.

The ad professionals, of course, talked about the genius and simplicity of an all-type ad and how it stood out. But the real world, well, they didn't give a damn about 'technique'. No, to them, the commercial created a visceral

reaction. A *what the fuck was that*, sort of visceral reaction. Or, *wait, is that even legal?*

Which is, of course, what Anthony and Nicholas were hoping for. After all, they crafted the commercial in such a way as to elicit just those reactions. White type on a black background scrolling slowly through the screen from bottom to top. A drum beat that sounded like a heartbeat was the only sound. The quiet of the commercial alone made people stop and look.

This is what they saw.

***We are looking for a Republican Senator to change
their vote on the upcoming climate change legislation.***

***By this, we mean change their vote
from nay to yay.***

***When they do, we will donate \$30 million to a
Super PAC of the Republican Party's choosing.
That Super PAC will be completely responsible for
deciding what to do with that money.***

***But it would only make sense to us if they did
not forget the Senator who made it all possible.***

Whomever that Senator may be.

The Betterment Alliance

It Can Be Done

The day after Super Bowl Sunday, the ad trades, as well as USA Today, NY Times, and Wall Street Journal—all have their list of ‘best’ commercials during the game.

The all-type spot that Anthony and Nicholas ran was not at the top of anyone's *best* list. Most criticized the commercial, saying that politics have no place in the Super Bowl.

This isn't to say that the spot wasn't talked about. As people gathered food on their plates before and during the half-time show, it seemed that "The Bribe," the name that quickly became associated with the commercial, was all anyone was talking about. And, of course, everyone wanted to know who, or what, the Betterment Alliance was.

If you went to the website for the Betterment Alliance, which later reports indicated more than half a million people did over halftime alone, all you found was a black screen with the following words in white scrolling up through it.

Hello.

We know you came to this site, wondering what, or whom,

The Betterment Alliance is.

And the answer is this.

We are your better selves.

Offering you the financial means to try and make the world a better place. Something that we think all of us, as human beings, hope for.

And yet, today the world is feeling nothing but hopelessness in trying to make that happen.

We would like to rekindle that hope.

In you.

And in all of humanity.

Because hope without resources, well, that's just wishful thinking.

But hope with resources, that creates change.

And change we must.

After all, we don't want the people of this planet to just hope for the best.

We're here to help turn your hope into reality.

The Betterment Alliance

It Can Be Done

The FEC was, not surprisingly, incensed. Was it a bribe or wasn't it they wondered? Their lawyers went through every word of the all type ad. And what they finally announced a few days later is that legally, the way it was worded *just so* was not against the *literal* rules of donating to a Super Pac.

After all, no politicians' names were specified in the commercial.

And the \$30 million would be given to a Super PAC, not to an individual or political party. So, by the letter of the law, all was kosher.

But nobody had any doubts that whichever Super PAC received the funds, it would be hard to ignore the politician who ended up bringing thirty million into their coffers.

Rumor had it that even a few on the Supreme Court—those that helped form the decision on Citizens United back in 2010—were flabbergasted. Well, embarrassed, actually. Not because that what was being done by the Betterment Alliance was illegal. No, what they were upset about was the audacity of showing the world, in plain English, just how flawed their decision on Citizens United actually was.

SIXTEEN

Zach Upchurch was one of the 42 Republican Senators who did as he was told, which meant toeing the party line. It didn't matter whether he agreed with where that line was drawn. He just knew not to cross it.

The directive from Republican leaders was to always remember the big picture. The ultimate goal being to get their candidate back into the Oval next term. By filibustering any initiatives brought forward by the Democratic Party, by not letting anything get through the Senate, even though it may well be desired by the majority of the American people, they could then campaign on the inability of the Dems to get things done. Even when, like now, the Dems had the majority.

Whether the individual Republican Senators agreed with or believed in what they were voting on made little to no difference. It was just politics, after all. And it was easy enough for Zach Upchurch to defend his positions to his constituents. They were more rabid against the Dems than he was. The ones whom it was getting more difficult to defend his votes to were his two teenage daughters. Especially on the current piece of legislation regarding climate change.

Like everyone else, Zach knew the planet was warming faster than ever. And he knew that this increase in warming was caused by the burning of fossil fuels. But the \$500,000 he got under the table from the fossil fuel companies helped fund his campaigns to keep him in office. And it was his being in office that allowed him to fight for other things that his daughters believed in. Somehow, at least for him, that justified any and all of his acts of hypocrisy.

Of course, Zach had watched the Super Bowl. And, of course, he had seen the commercial. Thirty million, he had mumbled to himself. Shit. Thirty million

is a lot of money. That much cash would easily let him run enough advertising to get re-elected in the next term. Of course, he couldn't directly request the money from the Super PAC. That would be illegal. But c'mon, everyone knew that Super PACS worked outside the lines. If he brought thirty million into a Super PAC, some of that money would have no choice but to find its way back to him.

As for the fall-out from deceiving his base—turning traitor in other words—and voting yes on the climate change legislation, well, he would just pass the blame on to his daughters. Say that they begged him to do the *right* thing. His argument would be that listening to his daughters superseded listening to his base.

Everyone, he thought, at least if they were fathers, would understand that argument. Even the red-necks and white supremacists who were keeping him in office.

His aide entered the room, telling him that the Minority Leader—Dick Andrews—was on the line.

"Patch him through, would you please," said Zach, unenthusiastically. He wasn't a big fan of Andrews, but...

"Zach, Dick here."

"Dick, what a nice surprise" (he could only hope he sounded sincere).
"Something I can do for you?"

"There is, Zach, there is. Watch the game, did you?"

"Wouldn't miss it, you know that."

"So I take it that you didn't miss that commercial either, then?"

"Which commercial was that, Dick? I mean there were a lot..."

"Don't bullshit me, Zach. Never bullshit a bullshitter. I got a lot of calls to make to everyone on our side of the aisle just to let them know that that offer,

that fucking, son-of-a-bitch, thirty million dollars of an offer, is persona non grata as far as we in the GOP are concerned. Not one of our 42 colleagues is going to take that offer. I mean, we're Republicans, Zach. All for one and one for all. You know that. We're a family and we can't be bought."

Zach couldn't refrain from smiling. Can't be bought? Hell, what does he think politics is? Everyone and everything is for sale, including Dick Andrews, from what he had been hearing from his colleagues. But before he could muster a response, Andrews continued.

"Course, I know that we don't have any concerns about you, Zach. Just wanted to touch base, is all. Can't talk long, got a lot of other Senators to catch up with. You understand, I'm sure. Nice talking, Zach. Say 'hi' to the Mrs and best to those two lovely daughters of yours."

"I will. And thanks for reaching out..."

Click.

Zach Upchurch looked at his phone, hearing nothing but dial tone.

"Dick."

SEVENTEEN

Roger Meekins couldn't quite figure out what he did to deserve such a gift. And here it was just handed to him. In front of over 100 million viewers, no-less.

Immediately, he was on the phone, telling his nightly, prime-time, so-called 'news' anchors to lead with it. Publicly bribing a politician, ha. Let's see the more liberal networks hem and haw their way around that one.

The narrative that Roger Meekins wanted his Democracy's News Network to take was *The Un-American Way on the most American of Sports Venues*. Is ours a political system—the best political system in the entire god-damn world, mind you—controlled by bribes? That was the storyline that he wanted his hosts to push. To most DNN viewers, it would not be considered a rhetorical question. And, of course, his network would bring in the so-called experts to argue the purity of politics. The fact that politicians can't be bought. And how un-American the entire idea of bribery is.

Pure bullshit.

But as Roger Meekins knew, nothing sells better.

Nicholas had grabbed a beer out of his fridge and settled into his favorite chair. Grabbing the remote, he tuned into the Democracy News Network. He didn't watch this particular network often, but it was the day after the game, and he wanted to see exactly how they would be spinning the commercial to fit it into their narrative. Once he saw how the network's anchors were handling it, he had to give them credit. He almost believed the

righteous indignation that they were portraying regarding someone trying to destroy the purity of politics.

Switching over to the so-called 'liberal' news networks, he saw that their lead was completely different. When is a bribe not a bribe was their way into the story. They, too, brought in their experts, legal scholars, who took the commercial apart, word-by-word, showing how it *legally* fit into what the FEC said was allowable when donating to a Super PAC. And they didn't forget to stress how they always knew that Citizen's United would one day lead to this.

Ethical versus legal, that was the argument being debated. Of course, the irony, not missed by many, was that Meekins' network was arguing the ethical side. And since Meekins ordered his talking heads to keep cranking up the volume, the argument quickly turned very loud and heated on social media as well.

Meekins' greatest fear was that some wayward Republican Senator would fold and take the thirty million. Dick Andrews had called him on the morning after the game, reassuring him that it wouldn't happen. That he would be talking to each of the 42 Senators in his party.

"We have nothing to worry about, Roger," Andrews had told him over the phone. "I am personally making sure of that."

As for this unknown entity, the Betterment Alliance, Meekins had his people doing a deep dive on that as well. To his surprise, they were coming up with very little. It seemed to be a 501(c) (3), started in the fall of the previous year. And the only name that his people could find that was associated with it was that of a lawyer, a person by the name of Logan Jamison. Meekins knew most of the big law firms and the best lawyers who worked for each of them. Yet, this Jamison person was a mystery. And Meekins didn't like mysteries. He also didn't like that he didn't know where the money backing the Betterment

Alliance was coming from. But it was early. He had a good team on it. He was confident that neither of those questions would remain unanswered for long.

To this end, he had already called Timothy Coffee. Ex-CIA and Black Ops, Timothy could ferret out almost anything about anybody. Meekins respected that about Timothy. But what he liked even more was that Timothy also knew how to play dirty. In fact, it seemed like that was the part of his job he relished the most.

Warren Holt watched the game from his home in Seattle. When he first saw the spot, he had to admit, it made an impact. Just the written word, laying it out like that, starkly, in black-and-white. Yes, it was shocking. True to his word, he hadn't looked at the creative beforehand, even though Logan offered to walk him through it.

"You sure you don't want to see it?" she said a week before the game.

He shook his head.

"Positive?" she reiterated.

He almost gave in, his curiosity almost got the better of him. But no, he wanted to experience it just like the rest of America. All he knew was that if they were as surprised as he was, then it had the chance to make some people uncomfortable. And, perhaps, even work.

As far as revealing that he was the man and the money behind the Betterment Alliance, he knew better than anyone that, sooner or later, it would leak out. Something like that couldn't be kept a secret forever. But for now, these initial weeks, it would make the message more impactful if his participation remained a mystery. Otherwise, all the attention would be on

him and not the discussion that the commercial was already eliciting. And they needed people talking if they wanted the Betterment Alliance to have a chance of creating change.

What he didn't like was that so far not a single Republican Senator seemed to have taken the bait. He wasn't used to failure. And in his opinion, if he didn't have results by Friday, that meant that this effort was, indeed, a failure. He had not only given Nicholas free rein but a budget from God. He told him that all he wanted in return was success. He never liked paying full fare for failure.

A full week had passed, and nothing.

Nicholas was perplexed at the lack of response from Republican Senators. Nothing. Crickets. They weren't even talking about it. Thirty million is a shitload of money for anyone to leave sitting on the table. When his phone rang, he wasn't too surprised to see Logan Jamison's name on his screen. *What happened? Why didn't it work?* she wanted to know. And even more importantly, her boss wanted to know. She would be in San Francisco in 24 hours and expected that he and Anthony would have some answers.

When Nicholas told Anthony that Jamison was coming to town, he was surprised at his reaction. "Great," Anthony said. "I wanted to see our lovely lawyer Logan again."

"What the fuck are you talking about, Anthony? You know, she's not coming here to kiss our ass. She's coming here to kick it. We need to figure out what our next steps are by the time she gets here."

Anthony just smiled. He seemed to be in a particularly joyful mood. "If you ask me, Nicholas, I think it's all just going rather perfectly," he said.

Perfectly? Really? thought Nicholas. He looked at Anthony suspiciously. "Care to explain how you see it that way?" he asked.

Anthony smiled. "We always said it was about greed, right?"

Nicholas nodded. That is what they had always said.

"We have unlimited funds, right? Well, not completely unlimited, but \$5 billion is practically unlimited. So here's what I'm thinking. What better way to show that it's all about greed than to run another spot, but in this spot, we up the ante to \$60 million? If someone takes that, and trust me, someone will, then it just reveals the greed and hypocrisy aspects even more. Can't be bought for thirty? Well then, Mr Republican politician, how about sixty? See what I mean? In a way, by no one taking the first offer, they've played right into our hands."

EIGHTEEN

“Sixty million?” said Logan Jamison, completely gobsmacked. “You want to increase the amount to \$60 million?”

“Why not? I mean, it’s not illegal, is it?” said Anthony, smiling at her—a smile that Logan noticed but failed to return. “Unless the amount we’re offering somehow changes the legality of the offer. Which—now I’m only a creative guy, mind you—but I don’t think that is the case.”

Logan took the smug jab from Anthony without a response. But Nicholas thought he did see a slight smile cross her lips. The three of them were sitting in an upstairs booth at Bix, a sophisticated speakeasy hidden away on Gold Street. It was actually in an alley, one undiscovered by many in San Francisco. But to Anthony, it was his go-to. The place never let him down. The upstairs booths provided just enough privacy so that those comfortably ensconced within them could discuss most anything—legal or illegal—with little chance of being overheard.

Anthony also knew it to be one of the most romantic places in all of San Francisco. Either that, or it was the martinis—considered by those in the know to be the best in town—that made it a particularly lucky spot for him. Nicholas and Anthony had spent many a night there working on creative ideas, usually at the bar, over one too many of their magical mixtures. Which is why he wasn’t surprised that Anthony suggested it when he heard that Logan was coming back to town.

The way Logan dressed let them both know that this was not her first time at Bix. Cocktail hour, cocktail dress. One that was obviously tailored to hug her in ways that would fail to do justice to any other female form. She came in empty-handed, carrying nothing with her but her directness.

“The way I see it, your creative idea was a complete failure,” was what she led with after they had settled into the booth and she had taken a sip of her martini.

“On the contrary,” countered Anthony. “It worked exactly as expected.”

Her look said what she was thinking. Bullshit not accepted here. “How is that exactly, Mr Ridgeway? When not a single Republican Senator took the bait.”

Anthony winced as he corrected her. “It’s Anthony, please. And what I mean is that it got people talking and set us up for the next step.”

“Next step?” she said incredulously. “If it’s this additional \$30 million that you’ve mentioned, then your next step seems to be to just throw good money after bad. I don’t call that a strategy, Mr Ridgeway. I’d call it desperation.”

She turned to look at Nicholas. “Correct me if I’m wrong, Nicholas, but when we met with Mr Holt in Seattle, you were saying something along the lines that great creativity required less money. Am I to assume that was all bullshit as well?”

Anthony looked over at Nicholas. “Why would you say something like that?” he asked, sounding surprised.

Nicholas sat back, shaking his head. “I think you’re misquoting, Logan, to be fair. And no, it wasn’t bullshit. It was in reference to media dollars. Great ideas need to run less because they are more readily watched the first time they run.”

Anthony nodded, even though he wasn’t really paying attention. He was too busy signaling the server, someone he seemed to know on a first name basis, to bring another round of drinks to the table.

Logan's martini was almost gone, as was the edge that she had come in with. "And how will this second commercial differ from the first, besides offering \$30 million more?" she asked.

Nicholas remembered Anthony saying to let her take a couple of sips of her martini before discussing next steps. Let the martini work its magic, he said. You'll be pleased with the effect they have.

"You know that I will have to see the commercial before you run it. For legal reasons, I mean," she continued.

"I was counting, I mean...we were counting on that," said Anthony. Logan looked over at Anthony, and for the second time, Nicolas thought that he saw a bit of a smile on her face. Almost. Then, just like that, she was back to business.

"And how do you know that the right people will see it this time? There are no more events like the Super Bowl with its hundred million viewers until, well, what I'm saying is that we don't have a year to wait."

"I was thinking we'd run it on the one thing all Republicans watch," replied Nicholas.

"Which is what? Backroad Truckers?" She started to snicker at her own joke.

Anthony couldn't help but join her. A sense of humor as well. My, my.

"No," said Nicholas. "Democracy's News Network."

Anthony looked surprised. The two of them hadn't talked media yet for this second spot. "Nicholas, wait, what? I mean, why would that network even agree to run it?"

It was Logan who answered before Nicholas had a chance to.

"That's easy, Mr"....she paused, reconsidered, smiled, and continued "...Anthony. Roger Meekins is making hay out of that last spot that you did. His viewers are eating it up. They love the narrative his so-called 'anchors' are

taking, especially that damn Brandon Cumberland. What an asshole. Bastardizing the news, spinning it into a false narrative, just to bring in the eyeballs. The more viewers, the more dollars. Worsen the discourse and viewership goes up. Meekins is not one to walk away from money. The reason he will run this second spot is the same reason that a Senator will take this newest offer. It makes them fucking rich.”

“Ha,” smiled Nicholas. Obviously, the martini was having an effect. “So, you seem to understand our logic.”

“I do. It doesn’t mean I like it. But I do understand it. I mean a three-year-old could understand your logic.” Nicholas wasn’t sure whether to take this as a compliment or not.

As the three fresh martinis were set down on the table, Logan looked at Anthony. “Another? Seriously?”

Anthony held his up for a toast. “But of course.”

She picked up her martini, waiting for Anthony’s toast.

“I was going to toast to your dress,” he said, staring at Logan, “but instead, I’m going to toast to greed. My god, you gotta love it.”

“Greed! Sure, why not? I’ll drink to that,” said Logan. “But as for this dress, I think you should know, this dress has been known to make grown men cry.”

And with that, she started to laugh to herself. A laugh that both Nicholas and Anthony found even more intoxicating than the martini’s.

NINETEEN

The 2nd spot ran on the Democracy News Network on a Tuesday night, prime time. Same style as before—all type scrolling up through the screen—white type on a black background, like newsprint, lending a sense of urgency. Again, no sound outside of a drum sounding like a heartbeat. Stark and startling.

Apparently, \$30 million wasn't enough.

Something about morals and ethics.

Yeah, sure. If you say so.

*Which is why we are now upping the offer to \$60 million
to be donated to a Super PAC chosen by the Republican Party.
In return, all we ask is for a Republican Senator to change their vote
from nay to yay on the upcoming Climate Change Legislation.*

Nay to yay.

One letter difference.

Easy, huh?

*What the Super PAC does with all that money is, of course,
completely up to them.*

*But it would be pretty hard to completely forget a Senator
who brought in \$60 million.*

Don't you think?

The Betterment Alliance

It Can Be Done

TWENTY

The Democracy News Network had a long-standing policy of not accepting or running any advertising for Democratic politicians or causes. But when the network's commercial clearance people saw the newest commercial that the Betterment Alliance wanted to run on their network, they did not immediately dismiss it out of hand.

Best if the boss made the call on this one, the clearance bigwigs all thought. They knew that while news used to be its own division, it had now merged with the entertainment division, creating something that didn't exist until recently. Something they were calling *opinion news*. If anybody questioned them as to whether their hosts were stretching the truth, they would just say that their prime-time hosts weren't legally acting as journalists. Their role during prime time would be more akin to a talk-show host. Which is why anything they said was just an opinion, not actual news. That their sets looked like a news set, well, that was just the way it was. After all, a judge once ruled that when it came to The Democracy News Network, any reasonable viewer would only watch the show with a healthy amount of skepticism.

Ha, thought Roger Meekins. To assume his viewers were reasonable, well, thank you very much, your honor.

When his people first showed him the \$60 million bribe commercial, Meekins viewed it as the gift that kept on giving. Of course, we're going to run it, he had said. No doubt about it. And we're going to run it on Brandon Cumberland's show. That will really piss off his viewers and drive up the minute-by-minute ratings. But, he told everyone involved that he wanted to make sure that Cumberland had no idea beforehand that it was going to run. Or, have any inkling as to what the commercial said.

His plan was for Cumberland to react to it in real time, on air. His program was more like reality TV than a legitimate newscast anyway. To see his reaction in real time would just make the whole thing more compelling. If Cumberland had a prepared attack against it, it would appear almost as if the commercial wasn't real. That it was a set bit, arranged by the network, with Cumberland's response sounding rehearsed.

Didn't want that.

What Meekins wanted was outrage. Moral indignation is what brought in the viewers. And dollars followed viewers. Yes, true outrage on Cumberland's part would be good.

When the commercial did actually run on Brandon Cumberland's Tuesday night's program, his first reaction was puzzlement. This was quickly followed by disbelief. What in the hell did I just see, was what his expression conveyed when they came back on air. Then it was, "Hey, wait a minute," to the control booth. "Guys, can you play that, play that last commercial again?"

The people in the control booth had already been briefed to do whatever Brandon Cumberland requested after the commercial ran. So, play it again they did.

"Did that say \$60 million?" he asked incredulously. "Sixty million? I mean, that is a sure sign of desperation on the part of the Democrats. And as the old saying goes, desperation is never attractive. They can't win fairly, folks, so instead they try to bribe our fine Republican representatives into doing their bidding. Of course, Republicans, being strong supporters of the Constitution and the rule of law, will just laugh at such an attempt at outright bribery. If you need a sure sign as to how far the Democratic party has fallen, ladies and gentlemen, I think you now have it."

And so on and so on.

The next day, outraged conservative viewers, not surprisingly, clamored to watch Cumberland's show to hear him tell them what they already believed—just how unethical and stupid the Democratic party, or, in this case, the Betterment Alliance was.

Which again, led to an astronomical number of hits on the Betterment Alliance website.

Which is exactly what Anthony and Nicholas were counting on when they rewrote the landing page of the site.

Hello, again.

And, yes, it's true.

We are now upping our offer to \$60 million for a Republican politician to change their vote from nay to yay on the upcoming climate change legislation.

And, yes, it's true.

Not one Republican Senator took us up on our first offer of \$30 million.

And, yes it's true.

They said it was something about morals and ethics.

But then again...

...perhaps \$30 million just wasn't enough for them to walk away from the enormous amount of oil and gas lobbying money that they are currently pocketing to vote nay.

Will \$60 million work?

One would have to live by a very high moral and ethical standard to turn down \$60 million.

Especially when all we're asking them to do is vote yay for something that they know in their hearts is right.

After all, if one is going to be morally and ethically correct, wouldn't they be obligated to do what they know in their hearts is morally and ethically right?

It's time to stop hoping for the best from our politicians.

It's time to turn hope into reality.

The Betterment Alliance

It Can Be Done.

Not bad, thought Logan Jamison to herself when she saw what Anthony and Nicholas had done with the Betterment Alliance website. Over thirty-three million hits in two days. She was starting to see how the art of advertising was not dissimilar to playing chess (or arguing a case in court, for that matter). The key was knowing how your competition was going to react and staying two moves in front.

She heard her cellphone bing. Picking it up, she saw that another mysterious text had come in. This particular sender was flirtatious at first, which is why she thought maybe, just maybe, it might be Anthony. She had met his type many times before. So obvious. So easy to play. But she had to admit, he did have a bit of charm to him. Good looking. Kept in shape. Great smile. If he wasn't working on this project for Warren Holt, then who knows, maybe.

But she had a rule. Her only rule. And she wasn't going to start getting romantically involved with anyone working for Warren Holt now.

Maybe when this project was over, she thought.

Her phone binged again. Another text. H'mmm. She was noticing that what started as a casual flirtation was beginning to turn ominous. And more than one person was texting. Even more disturbing was that the texts were now ending with a rifle emoji. Shit. That's never reassuring.

Her only guess was that someone was on to her and her connection with the Betterment Alliance.

Not that she wasn't expecting this. She knew it would only be a matter of time before people put two and two together. After all, she was the one who filed all the documents creating the 501(c)(3). She was the name, the only name, that was legally associated with the Betterment Alliance. If anyone did any digging, it wouldn't be long before they came across the name Logan Jamison.

Tracking her down through legal filings was one thing. That didn't bother her. What did bothered her was that they were now tracking her both online and on her phone. If they could do that, then they could find a way to track her in person. And it didn't seem as if it was just one that was doing it. Now they seemed to be working in packs.

Again, she wasn't surprised. Cowards always do, she thought.

Bing.

Looking down at the text, she shook her head. *Biatch*. Really? At least they could learn to spell correctly. "The word that comes with an 'a' is 'asshole', asshole," she said to herself with a laugh.

She would need to pick up another phone. And probably the sooner the better.

TWENTY-ONE

Zach Upchurch didn't see the second commercial when it ran on Democracy's News Network. He didn't need to. It was all everyone was talking about at the Capitol that week. Sixty million dollars has a tendency to get people's attention.

Of course, it certainly got the Minority Leader's attention. An emergency closed-door session was held with all the Republican Senators the morning after the spot aired.

"The answer is no," said Dick Andrews as soon as everyone had settled into their seats. "And I don't need to tell you what the question is. No one is going to change their vote from nay to yay. Is that clear?"

Zach looked around the room. He wasn't sure that it was clarity that he was seeing on the faces of many of those present. He knew that the most any one Senator got from the oil companies was just south of a million. But when you multiply that by sixty, Jesus, it kind of changes things, doesn't it?

He had talked it over with his wife that evening. How he could best rationalize with his supporters why he was changing his vote, using his daughters as his excuse. Sure, he might lose a few of his hard-core constituents. Sure, it meant he would be primaried. But no doubt a nice chunk of that \$60 million would be pushed his way by the Super PAC to help him in his next campaign. Call it a finder's fee. Ten percent, maybe even twenty. Easily enough money to buy new supporters, replacing any he might lose, keeping him in office.

To his surprise, his wife thought that he should take the bribe. "We've always known, Zach, you and I," she said, "that human-caused warming is real. And yes, up to now, admitting that would have been costly to your career. But

now, now with \$60 million, it seems that *not* admitting it might prove to be even more costly.”

Zach knew she was right. In fact, he knew that she was always right. To be honest, it pissed him off, just a little. And it was true that their two teenage daughters, Lora (13) and Becca (15), had both been harping on him to do the right thing. They were embarrassed to have to tell their friends that their dad was voting *no* on the legislation. Hadn’t he always said that the reason he got into politics was to make them proud of him? Something that didn’t seem to be going very well these days. “It’s all politics,” he had explained to his daughters, trying to rationalize his past actions. “It’s all just a game. We’ll tackle climate change. We have time,” he would say. “Trust me.”

But he knew that wasn’t true. Time was the one thing this planet didn’t have.

Unbeknownst to Zach Upchurch, he had even less time than he thought. Not so much regarding the planet, but regarding his fellow Republican colleagues. After all, he wasn’t the only one having long talks with their significant other the night before the vote.

Hypocrisy is an accepted strategy in politics. Some would argue that it’s become a necessary strategy—that you need to be a hypocrite if you have any hopes of being politically successful. Ironically, your fellow politicians didn’t see hypocrisy as a character flaw. These days, most viewed it as a strength, one of the keys to being good in politics. At least, a good Republican politician. The best could do it—be hypocritical—with a sly smile on their face, completely unfenced by the rail posts of dignity or shame. Besides, everyone knew, c’mon,

it was all *just* politics. They weren't *really* being a hypocritical asshole. They were just playing *the game*. A game that everyone played in Washington. What you said in private and what you said in public were two very different things. That was par for the course. What you said in public, that's what you got paid for by the lobbyists and private donors. In private, well, in private, you quietly compared notes with your colleagues to see how much they were getting for saying what they did in public.

That's how the score was kept. It was all based on how much money you could bring in. All for playing the so-called game.

Which is why when the vote for climate change legislation finally occurred in the hallowed halls of Congress, five Republican Senators changed their vote from nay to yay.

TWENTY-TWO

“Five!” exclaimed Roger Meekins, in a voice filled as much with delight as disgust. “Five Republican Senators voted for the climate change legislation. Are you shitting me?” He was actually rubbing his hands together. Really, could this even get much better? The amount of indignation his news hosts would have to dial up on tonight’s broadcast would be off the charts. How financially wonderful.

He knew that this would provide enough red meat to feed the base and keep them tuning in for weeks. Even though the five were Republicans, he would make sure that his network portrayed it as a public trial for those five. *The Unfaithful Five* was the label he had already come up with and would pin on them. He liked that and not just from a political front. Hell, there is probably some actual infidelity in their pasts—an intern, an aide—c’mon, it’s fucking Washington. He would get Timothy Coffee on it immediately. See what he could dig up. Twist the knife in them a little more. Watch them squirm. The Unfaithful Five. Yep. That will work.

He was already pleased with what Coffee was doing and what he was finding out about the Betterment Alliance. And even more so about the lawyer, this Logan Jamison, a relative unknown, who was connected to it.

Smart girl, apparently. Harvard undergrad. Second in her class at Stanford Law. The future couldn’t have been much brighter for her. And then what happens? She like just disappears. None of the top law firms grabbed her. Very unusual. Typically, someone like that would be too desirable not to be persuaded to take a position at a top firm. The money would have been too tempting. And an early partnership would have no doubt been promised.

But this Jamison chick, she became like a ghost. According to Timothy Coffee, the trail leading to her was not well-marked. But faint as it was, he had followed it and eventually found her. She lived in Seattle and she knew, or was in contact with, at some time, Warren Holt. She had a huge amount of money in her bank account, as did Warren Holt. And she paid a lot in taxes. More, in fact, than did Warren Holt. Now that was interesting, thought Meekins. A brain like that could demand as much money as she wanted from any firm she wanted. The only way she could make more money than from a law firm was... yeah, exactly, an uber-rich individual like Warren fucking Holt.

Meekins never liked Holt. Not that he knew him well. They had met, in passing, at a few functions. It seemed Holt, unlike his other rich cronies, never really wanted anything to do with Meekins. Never needed him. Never kissed his ass. Somehow assumed that he was above needing Meekins and his kind of people in media. Yeah, right. We'll see about that, thought Meekins.

But it was interesting that the only line Coffee had been able to draw from the Betterment Alliance was to Logan Jamison. And then a second line, a bit fainter, but still a line, from Logan Jamison to Warren Holt. She was listed as the Registered Agent for the Betterment Alliance, filing the 501(c) (3). It's not hard to file. The barriers to entry are pretty low. A few hundred dollars and a couple of hours are all it takes.

So that's it, thought Roger Meekins to himself. The Betterment Alliance *is* actually Warren Holt. Made sense. Holt always thought of himself as being better than his colleagues in the billionaire class.

He'd have to get Timothy Coffee to pursue this angle, push the Jamison chick a bit harder. He knew how Coffee operated. That by this time, he would have passed Jamison's contact info onto some of his so-called 'friends'. Just to let her know that she wasn't as invisible as she might think she is. Coffee could

be a little crude that way. Always hoping to scare his prey into making a mistake.

Just don't want to scare her back into hiding, thought Meekins.

After all, she's the one who is going to help them flush out Holt.

TWENTY-THREE

“What now?” said Anthony.

They were once again working out of Nicholas’ place in San Francisco. Anthony was finding that he actually enjoyed hanging out there. Nicholas had comfortable digs, tastefully decorated in a style that being good at something allows one to afford. In Nicholas’ case, that meant a lot of older things. He liked things from the past, antiques. The type of things that were made by hand, that are no longer made, and that can no longer be purchased. The kind of things that had some originality and authenticity to them. But above all, craftsmanship.

Like the 4-foot high Philco radio that Nicholas liked to turn on just to hear the static. Anthony guessed it was from the 1920s. It had three networks that you could tune into: overseas, police, and broadcast. All AM frequencies. If you turned it around and looked in the back, you would see the large glass tubes light up and glow as the radio came on. Why those damn tubes lighting up seemed to fascinate Nicholas, he had no idea. All he knew was that Nicholas’ fondness of antiques also explained the old slot machine he had from the 1930s. It took only nickels, and if you won the jumbo award—three Bell fruit logos all coming up at once—you were able to pocket five bucks. All in nickels. Back in 1930, that was probably a big deal.

But the thing that Anthony liked best was the old bumper pool table, a classic design, that Nicholas had discovered buried away in some farmhouse out in Petaluma, north of San Francisco. It was the sort of entertainment found in suburban dens of the Midwest back in the ’60s.

Hell of a game, thought Anthony. No idea why it ever lost its popularity. Even more so than snooker or eight-ball, bumper pool was all about angles

and bank shots. Not unlike the ad business in that sense. He and Nicholas would play it for hours. The fact was that they both found it a great way to pass the time as they threw around ideas.

“What do you mean, what now?” answered Nicholas, chalking his cue before carefully lining up his next shot.

“I mean, we wanted one Senator and we got five. We don’t pay all five, do we?”

Nicholas’ final ball was lodged in the right corner of the table. The only way to put it in the hole was to bank it off the lead bumper. Which he did. Perfectly. What pissed Anthony off is that he made it look easy.

“Nope. The Betterment Alliance still just pays \$60 million to a Super PAC that the GOP chooses. I mean, that was the deal. We pay the PAC, not the Senator. That’s how we stay legal.”

Anthony started to set the balls up for another game. “Still sticks in my craw, having to pay that much to the Republican Party. Jesus Christ.”

“I hear ya,” said Nicholas. “But to get some progress on legislation that will actually help to fight a warming planet, I mean, if it does that, then, I guess it’s a small price to pay.”

“And when it comes to paying them, I mean actually giving the Super PAC the money, I imagine Logan handles that.”

“She does. Don’t ask me how, but she does.”

“And she does it in a way that doesn’t lead back to Warren Holt?”

“That’s the idea.”

“You know, I like that girl.”

Nicholas couldn’t help but smile. “Hard not to notice the way you keep staring at her.”

“I sent her a text the other day, but it bounced back.”

“Oh, yeah, right,” said Nicholas. “I meant to tell you. She got another phone. Said something about being threatened.”

“Threatened? Really? Shit. She alright?”

Nicholas nodded. “Just cautious. Said she was used to assholes trying to scare her.”

“Yeah, she’s tough. Like that about her. But back to this payment deal. So what happens then, after she pays? Are we like then, well, you know, done?”

“Done?” Nicholas looked at Anthony, surprised. “Think we’re just getting started, really. All we’ve accomplished so far is to have politicians prove to the world that they are in it for the money. That their vote on legislation can be bought and paid for.”

“Yeah, I know, but I mean...exactly what are you saying? That we buy them off again to get something else changed?”

“I think maybe, yeah. Don’t see why not. We could pay a ton of money in media to run advertising that would attempt to appeal to the conscience of a politician to change their vote.”

“Uh, I see a problem with that.”

“That they don’t have a conscience, I know. The other option is to spend a ton of money to convince people to vote the assholes out.”

“That would take too long wouldn’t it?”

“Fraid so. And time is the one thing we don’t have. Which is why I think it will be more expedient, and probably less expensive in the long run, to just buy the bastards.”

“Okay, but c’mon man, that’s where I’m still confused. I mean, not everyone is going to want the legislation that we want, Nicholas. What we hope for, you and me, I mean, we both lean left, and that could be hell for others. We didn’t like it when the fossil fuel companies bought the Senators’

votes. Thought it was unfair. Others won't like it that now were the ones buying the Senators' votes. What's the difference, really, except this time our so-called side won?"

That was a problem that Nicholas didn't have an answer for. The country was too split to not see that what they were doing was just more of the same. Rich people or rich companies getting what they wanted. Isn't that what the fossil fuel companies have been doing for years? And the cigarette companies before them? The only difference now was that it was the left's point of view that won. In other words, their effort will be labeled and criticized as being paid for by the elites. Which, in reality, it was.

What they both agreed on was that if there was a low-hanging fruit, climate change was it. Most of the world wants climate change addressed. Easy to see why. It's a universal problem, affecting everyone. The last year had been the hottest on record. There was no escaping it. Whatever they decided to address next would not be so cut and dried due to the ideological polarization taking place in the U.S. The only thing that the two sides seemed to agree on was that the other side was trying to destroy democracy, while only their side was trying to save it.

So, no, the fact was, neither had an answer as to what they should address next. It was the question that Nicholas conveniently sidestepped when he first presented the idea to Warren Holt. Everyone knew of the many pressing issues that legislation needed to address, but with the polarization of the two parties, there was nothing that was as cut and dried as climate change. That's why they tackled it first.

But after that, it was as if the fucking world couldn't agree on what to hope for anymore. Didn't know truth from lies. Up from down.

Or, maybe they knew but just didn't give a shit.

“What everyone still wants or hopes for is a better life,” Anthony finally declared. “That much we know for certain.”

“Can’t argue,” agreed Nicholas. “But here’s the deal. Define better. For example, a border wall. Does something like that make life better? Or worse? For whom? And by how much?”

“I know. Depends who you ask, doesn’t it? And that’s the problem with anything we try to create hope for. It all depends on who you ask. You know for such a rich bastard, Holt is really a stupid shit, isn’t he? I mean, really, thinking that we, and by we I mean advertising, could create hope in the world. C’mon man. Hope is dead. Gone. It used to exist. It used to mean something. But now, I don’t know. I think the only place where you can still find hope today is in a fucking Disney movie.”

“Gotten pretty philosophical in your old age, Anthony,” Nicholas said with a smile. “I like it.”

“Shut up, asshole. And watch me bank this one in.”

TWENTY-FOUR

The emails started flowing into the Betterment Alliance even before the Super Bowl ended. Most of them were filled with hate, telling the Betterment Alliance to fuck off. That billionaires and buying votes had no place in a democracy.

When the second spot ran, upping the ante to \$60 million, the amount of digital hate mail tripled.

While Logan Jamison was expecting the negative comments, she was not expecting the quantity. When she shared them with Warren Holt, he read a few and shrugged his shoulders. “Look at this one. No place in a democracy for money? Someone actually said that. It’s the irony that makes that funny,” he said.

She thought about passing the emails on to Nicholas and Anthony, but why? Didn’t see how it could do any good.

That changed after the vote on the climate change legislation. It wasn’t that the number of emails decreased. No, the fact was the number of emails doubled again. But what had changed was that now they were no longer *only* filled with vile and venom. Seeing that money had a chance to actually change things, it seemed as if every fourth or fifth email was not only thanking them, but offering suggestions as to what the Betterment Alliance could create hope for next.

All the suggestions were hot-topic issues and, most were issues that were currently being held hostage by the divide between the two political parties. It was these hot-topic issues that people wanted the Betterment Alliance to address. With cash.

Some were even offering to send in their own money to help—five dollars here, ten there. It was as if they saw the Betterment Alliance as a way out. In other words, as offering—Logan didn't want to admit it, but she had no choice—as offering something that they could believe in.

Or in a word, hope.

Those emails, the ones that gave suggestions as to what to solve next, those were the emails she did forward on to Nicholas and Anthony.

“Are there no end to these?” wondered Anthony as he started to go through them. “Holy shit, this one wants us to end world hunger.”

Nicholas smiled. He had already gone through a lot of the emails the day before. “Did you see the one where the guy wants us to help him get laid? Said we were his only hope. Wasn't from you, Anthony, was it?”

“Very funny. And fuck you, Nicholas,” said Anthony. “But seriously, what are we supposed to do with all of these?”

“I think that within those emails, we find our answer,” replied Nicholas. “As you said, it's not our place to say what the world should be hoping for. But the world is telling us, right here, within these emails, what they want us to do next. All we need to do now is listen.”

The first step was to sort the suggestions into rows and columns to figure out which requests were the most frequent. The issue of abortion, both pro and con, received a lot of emails. Even though abortion was made illegal by the Supreme Court, turning it into a states' rights issue, the majority of people wanted it to be changed back. Or, made illegal throughout the country.

Voting rights also came up a lot. As did immigration and health care. And guns—both for and against more restrictions.

The next step was to cross-reference to see which of the most requested suggestions were actually fundamental needs—climate change fit into that

category because climate change was about the existential need for survival.

Then they needed to cross-reference the requests again to see which were not being addressed because of a stalemate in government, where the two sides could not come to some agreement. And then cross-referenced yet again to see if the stalemate was one of those things that money—at least dark money—was currently influencing.

Usually, if the majority of the American public wanted something done, but politicians were hesitating, money was the culprit. Which meant, as they had demonstrated with the climate change legislation, money could also be the solution.

That was the funny, or scary part, depending on how you looked at it. Everything that was being held up in the Senate or Congress was something that, with a few votes changing here or there, would actually proceed. In other words, government of the people, by the people, and for the people would actually start to be in vogue again.

As for fundamental needs, they were able to narrow it down to two. One was the right to vote. To Nicholas and Anthony, that was a fundamental need if democracy had any hope of surviving. The freedom to vote was seen by many as being taken away from them. The second was the fundamental need for safety. This was expressed by parents, the need to feel that it was safe to send their children to school, that they would not be gunned down in the classroom.

Congress had recently passed a gun control measure. A measure that concerned itself with mental health issues and strengthening the security of schools through armed guards and stronger locks on doors. And while it did introduce some red flag laws, it didn't raise the age from 18 to 21 to buy a weapon of war.

According to the most recent Quinnipiac poll, 74% of the American public wanted the purchase age raised. Over 80% wanted universal background checks. As well, the majority of Americans from both parties wanted registration to become universal. And yet, legislation on these items was being held up by filibustering Republican Senators. So much for trying to answer to the will of the people.

Which is why it was *this* need—the need for safety—that Nicholas and Anthony felt they should take on next. They knew that the failure to pass new gun legislation was certainly influenced by the lobbying money of the NRA. And it was something that was coming up for a vote in the upcoming term. Not surprisingly, the split was right along party lines.

In other words, the perfect subject for the next round of ads.

TWENTY-FIVE

The Democracy's News Network quickly invited all five of the rogue Republican Senators to come on and explain themselves on Brandon Cumberland's newscast.

Zach Upchurch was the first one to accept. Did he want to? Not really. But once he weighed the pros and cons, he knew that he needed to defend his position both to the base and to his voters. After considering all the different ways that he could do that, he concluded that there were no more friendly environs than the Democracy's News Network, especially during one of Brandon Cumberland's hours. But there was a second reason involved as well. If he was the first to go on the air and take the brunt of the voters' wrath, wouldn't he also deserve the brunt of the cash when the Super PAC decided to dole it out? It made sense to him.

What he hadn't planned on was Roger Meekins having other ideas.

When he heard that Upchurch was coming on, Meekins had only one directive. "Grill the fucker," he told Cumberland. Normally, the DNN went easy on Republicans. But this time, Meekins wanted to rile up the base against Upchurch and the other four. Since the Democrats weren't being their usual woke, cooperative selves, he needed some bad guys for his viewers to express their anger at. *The Unfaithful Five* fit the bill. He knew if it he turned up the vitriol high enough, it would keep viewers tuning in for weeks.

The interview with Cumberland was set up to happen over Zoom. At the appropriate time, Upchurch sat down in front of his monitor. He was nervous. Still not sure whether he was doing the right thing. But as he was greeted warmly by Cumberland, the nervousness started to dissipate. When the first couple of questions were undeniably softballs, he started to relax even more.

But then, as if a light switch had been suddenly turned off, the tone became darker, more accusatory.

“Did you not, in fact, do this strictly for a chunk of the sixty million?” Cumberland asked.

Upchurch had rehearsed enough to be ready just in case that question was asked. “What sixty million?” replied Upchurch, trying to portray complete innocence with a look he had practiced repeatedly in the mirror.

Cumberland gave one of those squints that he was well known for. The type of reaction that says *I don’t understand* when everyone knows he does.

“Hard to imagine how you didn’t know about the money, Zach. I mean it has been all over the news.”

Good, thought Upchurch. Since he was expecting that would be the follow-up question, he had rehearsed his response with his wife the night before. What they came up with was to use the excuse that he was working too hard for the people of his state—Kentucky—to pay much attention to what was on TV.

“Really gonna stick with that, huh?” asked Cumberland in a misbelieving and mocking tone. “That your decision had nothing to do with the money?”

“No, no, it didn’t,” said Upchurch, hopefully sincerely enough. “Brandon, I know that you have kids, and as you know, I have two teenage daughters,” he started with a smile. He had also rehearsed this part with his wife over and over until she said he was ready. “For those of you in a similar situation, I’m sure I’m not alone in saying that it is amazing how persuasive, not to mention persistent, teenage girls can be. I have had many long conversations with them, and in the end, they are the ones who convinced me to change my vote. They walked me through the science, they showed me how that when they have their children, my grandkids, that if we don’t do something now, then the

world my grandkids will be growing up in will not be as hospitable as the world we all are blessed to experience today. And if you look at it, if you look at what the fossil fuel companies are doing, they are, in fact, saying the same thing. That we need a new way to energize our planet. And that they are ready to help lead that charge. So in a way, I think that what I am doing is also actually supporting the fossil fuel companies.”

He thought he was especially clever, throwing in the part about how the oil and gas companies themselves are transforming into tomorrow’s energy companies. He knew oil and gas companies would need favorable legislation going forward, that they were already lobbying that some government subsidies for developing renewable energy comes their way instead of only favoring the ‘new’ green energy companies starting up. If the oil and gas companies understood that he, Zach Upchurch, was looking out for them, then perhaps he could cut it both ways. Get a large chunk of that \$60 million from the Super PAC and still, still rake in some money from his current benefactors.

He thought that Brandon Cumberland wouldn’t press him too hard on this obvious hypocrisy. After all, if anyone understood hypocrisy, it was Cumberland himself. To call a fellow hypocrite a hypocrite, well, wouldn’t that in itself be hypocritical?

“So I guess what you’re saying, Zach,” said Brandon, “is that when the \$60 million goes to a Super PAC, you don’t really want to receive any of that money. At least that’s what I think I’m hearing you say.”

Upchurch had to pause. That took him off guard. How was he supposed to answer that? If he just said no to any kickback on national TV, that would not do him any favors. Quickly, he adjusted. “Well...” he stuttered as he cleared his throat. “Of course, as you know Brandon, a politician cannot work hand-in-

hand with a Super PAC. Where and how a Super PAC spends its money is totally up to the PAC itself.”

“I see,” smiled Cumberland, “I see. So you’re not saying no to the money that at the start of the program you didn’t even know was there.” The famous Cumberland eye squint followed.

“No, I’m not saying no, stuttered Upchurch. “What I’m saying...”

“But you’re not saying yes, either,” smiled Cumberland.

“Well, I can’t say yes. I mean, that would be illegal.”

“Uh, huh. And illegality is something we all want to avoid, right?”

Zach Upchurch smiled weakly. Please let this interview be over, he was thinking.

Cumberland looked over at where he knew Meekins would be standing. Yep, there he was, giving him the tamp it down sign. He was kind of expecting that. He knew Meekins wanted to ride these guys hard, but not to the point where their constituents would vote against them. Make them sweat and then pull back, is what he had told Cumberland before he went on air.

Nodding to Meekins, Cumberland looked over at Upchurch and continued. “That said, having a teenage daughter myself, I do understand how persuasive they can be. I just want everyone to know that when it comes to our American Democracy, money can’t buy legislation. At least on the GOP’s side. I’m sure that you would agree with that, right Zach?”

Upchurch nodded, wondering if the sweat he was feeling under his arms was also showing up on his forehead.

But he did see that Cumberland had to try to hide a smile as he talked about democracy. That was the game, thought Upchurch. That was the message the DNN wanted to be sure their conservative, evangelical viewers understood. Their side isn’t for sale. Never has been. Never will be. That they

are above that, both morally and ethically. Yeah, sure. Whatever is needed, smiled Upchurch as he continued nodding. Whatever the fuck is needed.

All he knew is that he brought in \$60 million to help the party.

Let's not anybody go and forget that, okay?

TWENTY-SIX

Logan Jamison wasn't surprised when Warren Holt asked her to meet with him at his home. He greeted her wearing a jogging suit. Logan always found it strange when he wore it. As far as she knew, Logan was a cyclist, not a runner. What it meant was that this meeting would be more relaxed than others.

That said, she was once again wearing a pencil skirt and blazer. She had noticed that Holt seemed to like it when she wore skirts. And she couldn't help but notice that the tighter her skirts were, the better he seemed to like them. Under the blazer, she wore only a low-cut bustier. As she felt safe with Warren, she thought why not give him a little jolt. She found it served her well when it came time to talk about her bonus.

She did wonder once if she would sleep with him if he asked. And she had a hard time coming up with concrete reasons not to. Oh, there were the ethical reasons. He was her boss and all that shit. But hell, he was an attractive man. Um-married. And mega, mega wealthy. Besides, they were both adults.

But, fortunately, or unfortunately, the question never came up. He never asked. In fact, he basically treated her like his sister. In a strange way, she was hurt.

"So, thoughts?" started Warren, as she took a seat in one of the leather chairs across from him. "How do you think what Nicholas and his partner have done is working? And by the way, does this partner have a name?"

"He does. It's Anthony. Anthony Ridgeway."

"Right...Anthony. Okay, then. Your thoughts on Nicholas and this Anthony fellow."

"They struck a nerve, obviously. Pissing off the right-wingers."

“And you say that why?” asked Warren.

“Threatening texts.”

“To whom? Wait. What? You?” Warren appeared concerned.

Logan nodded. “As you know, I’m the only one associated with the Betterment Alliance through the filing papers. Not difficult to ferret that information out. And as we both know, tracing a phone these days is easy.”

“Do you need...want...protection?”

“Not yet. I’ve already picked up a new phone. That’s why I gave you that new number. They shouldn’t be able to find me for a while.”

“Are you sure.”

She nodded yes, but in reality, she wasn’t sure at all.

Silence came over the room, giving Warren a chance to calm down.

Looking over at Logan, he saw that she was staring at him.

“You obviously want to say something, so go on and say it.”

She shook her head. “No, never mind. It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit, I know you too well, Logan. It’s not nothing. So whatever it is, c’mon, tell me.”

Logan took a long, slow breath, buying time to help gather her courage.

“Okay. I know we’ve discussed this, but what I’m wondering is when are you going to let them find *you*?”

Warren knew that was going to be the question. That was always going to be the question. When would he let it be known that he was the money behind the Betterment Alliance? The problem was that he didn’t have the answer. All he knew was that now wasn’t the time. Not yet, at least.

It was a problem that the two of them had discussed earlier. Billionaires are universally frowned upon. Sure, everyone likes to watch billionaire porn—tour the houses they live in, peek inside their private jets, watch them

disembark from their space capsules, read about their tawdry divorces and affairs—but still, who gave the uber-rich the right to write the rules of the world? Books were already coming out that argued that the whole economic inequality thing was caused by the billionaire class itself.

And now a billionaire is doing what? Trying to fix it? Like, oh yeah, fat chance. No billionaire goes around acting like a concerned global citizen if there is not something in it for them. Any action they take is either going to make them richer than they already are, or, somehow, assuage their own personal brand.

So why would this be any different? Once the public knew it was Warren Holt behind the Betterment Alliance, the questions would be all about him. Not about whether what he was doing could help or not. But whether he, actually whether anyone, had the *right* to do what he was doing.

“I still think it’s too early. Right now, the Betterment Alliance, without me being attached to it, is like this magical, mythical savior. And it’s only magical because nobody knows how it works or who I am. Everybody who likes the Alliance does so because right now it has no baggage. As soon as people know it’s me behind it, my money, my character, my past, it puts a stench on the Alliance. And like with any magic trick, once you know how the trick is done, the magic is gone. At this point and time, I think the world needs to believe in magic. Right now, I’m just the type of baggage that the Alliance doesn’t need.”

Logan knew that what he was saying made sense. But she also knew the realities they faced.

“I get all that. And I don’t disagree. But, I mean, if they found me, Warren, they’ll eventually find you. I know, you grabbed me right out of Stanford Law and squirreled me away before anyone knew I was gone or even

existed. And it worked. To a point. But these days, there's too much that's impossible to hide. I was the first to be found. But we both know you're next."

Warren shrugged his shoulders as if to say so be it.

Logan smiled. "Somehow I knew that was the way you were going to see it. But here's why I think you're being too cavalier. As you just said, for maximum impact, we're the ones who need to retain control of the reveal. We need to mold it. To market it. To, for lack of a better word, brand it"

"Is that you talking now? Or, Nicholas?"

"Both, actually. We both know that the reveal will be news and that we want to be able to capitalize on that as much as possible. Nicholas is already calling it Stage 2. Stage 1 was to launch the Alliance, give people something to believe in, or in other words, to start to create the hope that you wanted. And that seems to be happening, at least according to the positive emails I've been sharing with you."

"And this Stage 2, this reveal, will do what exactly?"

"Let the world see for itself that a man with money, morals, and ethics can actually manipulate the fulcrum that makes the planet spin for the better."

"That's nice, Logan," Warren said with a smile, "but I'm afraid that my morals and ethics would be questioned by many and the spin they would put on it, well, let's just say that it would be ugly. Don't forget, I'm a billionaire. And to some, hell, to most, all billionaires are crooked."

She nodded. "Yeah, I know. And you're right. Your morals will be questioned. But I have faith that Nicholas will find a way to even use that to our advantage. To have you somehow defend your morals in a way that gives you the upper hand."

"It appears that you think that we made a wise choice with Nicholas, then?"

“He’s smart,” nodded Logan. “And his work seems to get attention.”

“And his partner, this, what did you say his name was?”

“Anthony.”

“Yes, this Anthony character. What are your thoughts?”

Logan hesitated. She couldn’t tell Warren what she really thought. No, that would be too personal, too intimate, crossing the line. Something that she would never do. Even if Warren did look at and treat her like a sister.

“The two are like peanut butter and jelly, “ she finally said.

“Peanut butter and jelly?” Warren looked confused.

“I mean, they go well together,” said Logan with a smile.

“Oh, sort of like champagne and caviar then,” said Warren.

“I guess. To each his own, Warren. To each his own.”

TWENTY-SEVEN

The diner was located off the main highway that leads into Frankfort, Kentucky. Jessie Smokes had been coming here for fifteen years. Every morning, 7:30 sharp, Jessie would come through the door. Ellie, the owner, who named the diner after herself, always had a cup of coffee waiting for Jessie, even before he took his seat at the counter. That's how regular he was.

To Jessie, being regular pretty much described Kentucky. It was regularly one of the worst-performing states in the Union. The poverty level, one of the highest in the country at 18.3%, put them close to the bottom (48th) out of all 50 states.

Kentucky was also in the bottom ten in terms of health care and quality of life. Their schools were overcrowded, underfunded, and offered a badly outdated curriculum. How were Kentucky kids, of whom he had three, supposed to get ahead? Especially when the median income was only \$34,925. Luckily, he made more than that. At least he did if the jobs kept coming his way.

Ellie had come over and was waiting to take his order even before he had sat down. "I don't know why I even ask, but I suppose that you want the usual today, right Jessie?" she said, sliding the cup of joe over in his direction.

"You know me too well, Ellie," he said, smiling as he took the coffee. The thing is, Jessie always took the usual, which meant two eggs over easy, a side of bacon, hash browns, and white toast, gently burnt. In Jessie's mind, that's what separated a good breakfast diner from a bad one. How well they could *gently* burn the toast. To him, it was an art form. And at Ellie's, they had mastered it.

"Elijah coming in this morning?" she asked, as she set down another cup in front of the empty stool to Jessie's left.

“S’pposed to.”

Nodding, she poured the coffee into the empty cup. Elijah was like clockwork most mornings as well. “You two still working on the Dumphries house?”

“Another couple of weeks, I think,” Jessie said with a nod. He was an electrician—had been for some thirty years. Elijah was his assistant, only in his twenties, but already twice as fast.

The TV was on in the corner above the coffee maker. As always, it was turned to The Democracy News Network. It was the only truthful news on TV, or so Ellie and her customers would argue. As Elijah came in and sat down next to Jessie, the newscaster was talking about the five Republican Senators who had flipped over to the Democrats’ side on the climate change legislation. Both Jessie and Elijah thought the new nickname that Meekins had given them—*The Unfaithful Five*—fit perfectly. There was real anger in Kentucky at the five—fucking idiots—is what everyone was calling them. Everyone knew that approving the climate change legislation would only raise the price of gas, cutting into their take-home pay.

“Somehow, I think politicians are the only ones who make any money in this state. They’ve forgotten all about the honest, hard-working man,” said Jessie with a smirk. Ellie looked over at him, a scowl on her face.

“And women,” he added, correcting himself as he smiled at Ellie. “I mean, the politicians make money, and we lose it. Damn bastards.”

Ellie came out with Jessie’s breakfast and set it down in front of him. She had to agree with the point Jessie was making. “Sixty frigging million dollars...” She shook her head. “I sure could use some of that. I mean, everyone who comes into this diner could use some of that. The way I look at it, as long as it’s us they’re screwing, the least they could do is share some of that payola.”

She looked at Elijah. "Pancakes, right, sweetie?"

Elijah nodded. As Ellie walked away, Elijah elbowed Jessie in the arm.

"You know...she's got a point."

"What's that? That Kentucky's a poor, fucking state?"

"No, I mean, yes, it is that, but...what she just said. You know that thing about sharing some of that payola."

Jessie turned to stare at Elijah before he began laughing. "Right, like that dumb shit Upchurch is going to do that."

"Not of his own accord, no," said Elijah. But, I mean, he is our Senator. He wouldn't be sitting there in that highfalutin' office without us. We the fuck voted him in."

"And the problem is, he's got another year before we can vote him out," said Jessie. "You don't think he knows that?"

"Yeah, I'm sure he's quite aware of that. But you know, I was watching DNN last night, Cumberland's show, and he said that we need to fight for what we think is rightfully ours in this country. That's the American way. Always has been. Always will be. That we have no choice if we want to save democracy. And speaking about democracy, I mean at least to me, democracy means having the right not to be stabbed in the back by the guy we put in office."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Kind of early in the morning to be so high and mighty, don't you think, Elijah? Just let me eat my breakfast, will ya?"

Elijah turned away, and Jessie could see that he was hurt. With a sigh, he put down his knife and fork. Kids, he thought.

"Okay, so what were you thinking of doing?" he asked. "Send him a nasty letter? Troll him on Twitter or whatever the fuck it's called now? Really, Elijah, you think that's gonna make a difference?"

Ellie had returned with Elijah's pancakes. "Ellie, a question," said Elijah.

“Shoot, sweetie.”

“Do you own a gun?”

“P’ssh. C’mon, Elijah. That’s like asking if a bear shits in the woods. You know everyone here in these parts owns at least one. Why you asking? Need to borrow it or something?”

“Yeah,” joked Jessie. “He’s thinking of going and robbing Upchurch.”

Elijah turned back to Jessie. “No, no, stop making fun of me, Jessie, and hear me out. I just think that we need to send a note to Mr UpChurch letting him know that here in Kentucky, we understand our 2nd Amendment rights.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that we have the right to bear arms, and most of us here in Kentucky do exercise that right.”

“Fraid I’m not following,” said Ellie, “so I’m just gonna leave you two.”

“Fraid I’m not following either,” said Jessie as he went back to his breakfast.

“What I’m trying to say is that we write Mr Upchurch a letter letting him know that we want to talk to him about his current vote.”

“A letter! Whew, scary.”

“Well, it can be. Depends how we sign it.”

“And what are you thinking. Signing it, an angry constituent.”

“I don’t know. Maybe. But maybe more than that. Maybe not just an angry constituent. Maybe something like an armed and angry constituent.”

Jessie looked at Elijah. His look said what he didn’t have to. Not a half-bad idea. Especially for so early in the morning.

TWENTY-EIGHT

“Wait,” said Anthony. “Did I hear you right? Did you just say that there are some 393 million firearms in the hands of American citizens?”

“That’s what it says here, yeah,” replied Nicholas. He was reading from his computer. They were working out of Nicholas’ place again.

“And how many people do we have now in the country?”

“Around 326 million.”

“So that’s what? More guns than people?”

“By quite a bit.”

“And how many of those guns are unregistered?”

“Most of them. It says here only a little over six million are registered.”

“You’re shitting me, right? I mean, really?”

“From what I’m reading here, I shit you not.”

“Man, it’s even worse than I thought,” said Anthony. “And still, I mean Congress still doesn’t vote to pass legislation that requires gun registration to be mandatory on a national basis. I don’t get it. We register cars, we license dogs...”

“Computers.”

“...yep, register computers...but guns...”

Nicholas cut him off with an incredulous stare. “Seriously, Anthony. What don’t you get? The NRA is involved, paying legislators for the vote to go their way. Money trumps conscience and common sense. When it comes to guns, it’s a money game.”

“And when you say money, you mean greed?”

“Yep, it’s as American as apple pie and the Second Amendment.”

Anthony smiled. He found Nicholas's line funny. That greed was as American as the Second Amendment. But what wasn't funny is that he knew Nicholas was right. When money starts talking, the law starts walking. It was always greed that greased the wheels of progress. But c'mon, these were killing machines they were talking about. Killing machines that target not just people, but kids. A few nights earlier he had read that guns were the number one killer of kids and teens. Not cars. Not drugs. Fucking guns.

"It's not like people don't know how dangerous guns are, Nicholas. Even Republicans know that. And yet, what do they do? They offer thoughts and prayers as they're out spending the money they're given to keep the guns in the hands of those who mean harm. I mean, Jesus. And here I thought advertising people were slimy."

"Don't kid yourself. To most people, we are," smiled Nicholas. "Remember that movie, way back when, called *The Man In The Gray Flannel Suit*?"

"Way before my time, buddy.."

"You wish, asshole. The movie had a line in it that more or less ruined the advertising profession forever."

"Yeah, what was that?"

"Something along the lines of 'when you're in advertising, you become not a cheat, not a liar, exactly, just a man who'll say anything for money.'"

"Anything for money. Sounds about right. Ad folks and politicians. The true pillars of society."

"So, what do you think?" asked Nicholas. "Do you think we can play off the guilt of those who won't pass any laws that might stop all these killings?"

Anthony looked skeptical, but Nicholas continued.

"I know, doubtful, but hear me out. What if we ran a campaign asking how many more lives needed to be lost before they start feeling guilty about the money they're taking?"

Anthony still looked confused, so Nicholas continued.

"What if we gave them, like a limit, put a price on it, but in terms of lives lost, not money, and got them to agree to it. Something like Will you vote for some sort of sensible gun control legislation after another thousand lives are lost? Or, maybe ten thousand, will that do it? Twenty thousand? Really, what's the limit? How many more will it take before you say that's enough? We can even have them give us a number. I mean, there has to be a limit, doesn't there?"

"Cheeky bastard, aren't you?" smiled Anthony. "But it's interesting. How many did we lose on 9/11? Just under three thousand, right? And what did we do? Started a war on terror. I was checking drug overdoses the other day. Just under a hundred thousand in a year. And what do we have? A war on drugs. We have how many gun deaths a year? And yet, there is no war on guns?"

Nicholas looked over at Anthony. There was sadness in his eyes. A sadness that revealed how hopeless it all felt.

"So, yeah, we could do something cute like that," Anthony continued. "But I'm afraid that any limit they set would be set pretty high. Besides, that's gonna take time and cost whatever number of lives they agree to. And how would you feel if you were one of the parents whose kid died just to make the number? No, I think to speed things up, I say we just offer them money."

"You're even more of a cynical SOB than me, aren't you?"

"These days being a cynic is just being a realist, buddy. Just being a fuckin' realist."

TWENTY-NINE

When Dick Andrews was told that the call was from Roger Meekins, he wasn't happy about it. But he also knew that he had no choice but to take it. Apprehensively, he answered.

"Roger, how good of you to call."

"What the fuck is going on, Dick?"

"Roger..."

"You said that you had it handled. That no one would take it."

"I know. But...but, um, you know, Roger, it was a fucking sixty million. That amount is hard to say no to. I mean, even I was tempted."

Roger Meekins didn't reply, and Dick Andrews was finding the silence awkward. What could he say to get Meekins to calm down?

"And, I mean, well, I guess what I'm saying is...look, there is a bright side."

"Bright side? Really?" replied Meekins. "Go ahead, I'm listening."

"Well, I mean...we did get sixty million into the Republican coffers." Meekins again paused. He thought he knew where Andrews was going, but he wanted to make sure.

"And how in God's name does that help me, Dick? And hopefully, you know the right answer."

"Well...look at your ratings, Roger. I mean, the Unfaithful Five, by the way, I think that was a bit extreme, calling them that...I mean we still want those guys to win their next elections...but...as for your ratings, they're through the roof. So I really don't see..."

Roger Meekins cut him off. Andrews wasn't going where he wanted him to. "You're missing my point, Dick."

"I am? How's that exactly?"

"The sixty million you're getting..."

"Yeah, what don't you get?"

"That's exactly my point, Dick. How much of it I don't get. I'm expecting, you understand, that my network will see quite a bit of that sixty mil in the way of advertising dollars."

Jesus, thought Dick Andrews. That's what it always comes down to, doesn't it, for Meekins? How much is in it for him? Not that Andrews wasn't thinking that about himself and his upcoming campaign. After all, since he would be the one to choose which Super PAC the money will be going to, he was going to make doubly sure that it was a PAC that would siphon some of that money his way. As for Meekins, of course, *some* money will be going to his network to run ads. But how much? That hadn't been decided.

"Well, we haven't..."

Meekins cut him off.

"You haven't...what...yet?"

Silence from Andrews.

"Good. 'Cause here's the deal. If I don't see that money, and I mean a whole fucking lot of that sixty million flowing to the DNN, you're not going to like where I go next."

"I see. So this is all about getting yours, is it?"

Meekins chuckled softly over the phone. "C'mon, Dick. That's the way the game is played. And I think you, better than anyone, know the rules. Hell, if I remember correctly, you basically helped write them."

THIRTY

The gun legislation currently up for a vote before Congress was on whether the buying age should be raised to 21 and whether registration should be mandatory. Not only registration for any gun purchases going forward, but also for current gun owners. The majority of the American public, both Democrats and Republicans, were in favor of both pieces of legislation.

Due to the filibuster and the Republicans' oath of loyalty to party, the Democrats knew that the legislation didn't have a chance of passing. It almost made the charade of holding a vote pointless. But without the charade, the Democrats would not have a finger to point at the Republicans in the next election. Or, after the next mass shooting, which would undoubtedly come first.

Of course, all of Washington was still buzzing about the Betterment Alliance and how it influenced the vote on climate. Most were thinking that it was just a one-off. Some rich climate evangelist who got what they wanted because they had a shitload of money to burn. No one was thinking that the same bribe approach would be used on guns, much less on any other future legislation.

After all, when it came to legislation, guns and climate were two different things. Guns were protected—at least according to some—by the Second Amendment. Not to mention, the NRA. If anyone was going to spend money to *support* guns, you could count on the NRA to do just that. Dark money seemed to flow from their coffers like water from a tap. History had proven that you weren't going to outspend them, at least, no one had to date.

And if anyone did stupidly decide to go against them, playing dirty was something the NRA was quite good at. They were not adverse to using threats

against opposing politicians and their families. Some less veiled than others. Vote against them, and the next thing you know, they're running outdoor advertising in your neighborhood asking if the rumors are true that you are a pedophile. Nobody needed that. To do what they knew was right wasn't worth the risk. So they let their silence be purchased through threats.

Which is why it wasn't surprising that when Anthony's and Nicholas' commercial ran on a Wednesday night on the Democracy News Network, it was all anyone was talking about on Thursday morning. Another sixty million offered to a Republican Senator to change their vote from nay to yay on the upcoming gun legislation.

Most were flabbergasted. So much money, \$120 million now in total, everyone knew that was unprecedented. And to do it in public, again unprecedented. Who the fuck was this Betterment Alliance, and more importantly, who was behind it, was what everyone wanted to know.

What no one doubted was that some Senator would take the money. After all, that precedent had already been set. And the so-called Unfaithful Five—they were still in office—relatively none the worse for wear. The only question now on everyone's lips in Washington was which Senator, or Senators, would cross over?

Of course, the GOP was more than flabbergasted; they were furious. As were its constituents. "*Do something*" was their cry for help, which was ironically the same cry for help that gun control advocates and parents of dead children express whenever a school shooting happens. But what could the GOP do outside of having a loyal supporter on their side try to outbid the Betterment Alliance? And to do that, they would need to appear even more hypocritical after going on the national airwaves and saying that Republicans couldn't be bought. That Democracy wasn't for sale.

Sure, they could quietly go to the NRA and say you need to put up more. But the problem was that the NRA didn't have more. At least, not that they could access before the legislation was voted on. After all, \$60 million was not an insignificant amount of money. Not many had that much just lying around. It would have to be raised quickly, and since the vote was less than a week away, that seemed to be out of the question.

Instead, Dick Andrews doubled down with Roger Meekins. Quickly and quietly, Andrews had called Meekins saying, "Screw the bastards who think about voting yes on this gun shit. I mean, start warning them on your broadcasts that they will be fucked over big time. Get your social media gurus working on it as well. Threats are not off the table. I want you to scare the shit out of those on my side of the aisle so that no one will ever want to accept one of these offers again."

Meekins' only response was, "Gladly."

The only surprise still to come was which Republican was going to fold?

That it was Zach Upchurch was the part that was completely unexpected.

Not that it should have been. Really, what did he have to lose? He had already screwed his base. And IF his rationale was that some of the first \$60 million would buy him a new base, imagine what a chunk of the \$120 mil would allow him to purchase?

Not to mention, Zach had noticed a lot more love coming from his daughters after his yay vote on the climate legislation. It wasn't just that they seemed to respect him more, he had also noticed that they were no longer embarrassed to be seen in public with him. In fact, they even invited him to some of their events.

That hadn't happened for quite a while.

Which is why he had even started to convince himself that it wasn't about the money, no, not *really*. It was about making his daughters proud of him. He had talked it over with one of his colleagues during lunch earlier that week. "Dangerous shit," his colleague had said. "Thinking that you're in this game so that your kids can be proud of you. Hell, it almost makes you sound like a Democrat."

At the time, Zach could only laugh. But that evening, while he was working late in his office, he did start to wonder why he really was in this game of politics. It was to make money, yes, both above and below the table. And with so much coming in under the table, he had quickly discovered that it was way more money than he could make in the private sector.

But at the same time, soaking in the admiration of his daughters, hell, that was sweet. Even sweeter than money? Maybe. Would they feel the same with this upcoming legislation? Guns weren't like the climate issue. It didn't affect the whole world. It wasn't...what did the Democrats call climate change? *An existential crisis*. Like, if people even knew what that meant.

Besides, he, like most people he knew, owned a few firearms, even taught his daughters how to shoot. His daughters weren't as concerned about guns as they were about climate. Not in fucking Kentucky. So he knew that it would be more difficult to use family as the reason why he changed his vote.

More difficult, yes.

But impossible? No.

C'mon, impossible is nothing when you're talking about \$60 million.

THIRTY-ONE

The Betterment Alliance website was, once again, mobbed after the bribe commercial on guns ran on Wednesday night. Those who went to it found the following.

Hello, again.

We know you're here for one of two reasons.

Either you hate us.

Or, you love us.

Some of you are probably mad at us

for paying big money to get legislation passed.

How undemocratic you and your favorite network are claiming.

That's not the way Democracy works.

And you would be right if we were the only ones doing it.

But the fact is that the NRA is currently paying out

close to \$50 million to Republican politicians to make sure that gun control legislation never passes.

In other words, it is in the financial interests of one of this country's two political parties, to let the slaughter of our children continue.

And if that's the case, then doesn't it also make sense to use financial interests to try and get the slaughter stopped?

It does to us.

It's time to stop hoping for the best from our politicians.

It's time to turn hope into reality.

The Betterment Alliance

It Can Be Done.

Roger Meekins was one of those who went to the website. He had to admit, it was pretty damn good. Short. To the point. Not to mention, extremely pointed. He especially liked how they subtly took on his own Democracy News Network. Well now, that did make it interesting, didn't it?

It's time to turn hope into reality. Yeah, right, he thought. It's not hope that's going to be turned into reality. It's hate.

And he, better than anyone, knew just how to do it.

THIRTY-TWO

When Logan Jamison first heard the noise coming from the main floor of her house, waking her up, she brushed it off. Wind, she thought. Maybe a raccoon. The second bump, though, that's what got her attention.

Turning to her side, she pulled the drawer open on her bedside table. She felt the cold steel of the Glock that she always kept loaded, ready, just in case. Looking down at the digital clock next to her bed, she saw it read 2:32.

She normally wouldn't be worried about things that go bump in the night. But with the recent threatening texts that she had been receiving, and that she thought she saw someone tailing her the other day as she was driving through Seattle, she was more than a little jumpy.

Swinging her legs over the side of the bed, she pulled the Glock out of the drawer. She was taught how to shoot by her father. She didn't have a choice in the matter. He had wanted a son and, by God, she was going to learn everything that a boy could do, but do it even better.

Tip-toeing slowly to her bedroom door, she reached for the robe hanging on the hook behind it. She always slept naked—read it was good for skin circulation—but the real reason was that she had nothing to hide. She worked hard on looking good and was quite proud of the results that she had obtained. Fuck it, she thought to herself. If she was going to put a bullet in some bastard, he may as well go out with the last thing he sees being something beautiful.

The fir flooring in the hallway that led to the stairs was recently redone to eliminate the creaking. Thank God, she thought. The spiral stairs leading down to the first floor were custom-made out of Italian iron. The iron felt cold to her bare feet. In fact, she found herself shivering all over. Damn, maybe she should have worn the robe.

But it was too late now. She wasn't hearing anything coming from the first floor as she made her way down the stairs. Wait. From the kitchen. What was that?

It sounded like the door that led to the back. But which was it? Did it just open? Or, just close?

Inching her way along the wall that led to the kitchen, she peeked her head around the corner. The kitchen was dark and appeared empty. She felt a breeze and saw that the back door was ajar.

Reaching her hand around the corner, she hit the light switch. As the overhead light flooded the room, she came around the corner, low, the Glock in both hands, pointing straight out, her knees bent, just as her father had taught her.

Sweeping the Glock left and then right, she confirmed that the room was empty. As the breeze from the open door hit her skin, she shivered, making her even more aware of her nakedness. Walking over to shut the door, she noticed a torn slip of paper on the counter. It wasn't something that she left there, that she knew.

Picking it up, she read the crudely written note. *Consider this warning number two, biatch. You only get three. We know where you sleep. What you drive. And who you are. Next time, it just won't be a note that we leave behind. By the way, nice digs.*

A shiver shot through Logan's body. And this time it had nothing to do with not wearing her robe.

THIRTY-THREE

Ellie handed Jessie the morning paper as he took his seat at the counter. "You saw it, right?" she asked, pointing to the headline.

The news was all about Zach Upchurch voting yes on the gun control legislation. "Yeah, I saw it. Stupid bastard," Jessie said, shaking his head. "Why in the hell would he go and do something like that?"

"Why do you think?" said Ellie, setting a cup of coffee down in front of Jessie. "It's money. No matter what they say, it's always about the money, honey. Isn't that right, Elijah?"

Elijah had just walked in and taken his usual stool at the counter next to Jessie. "When money talks..." he said, "...morals walk. Everyone knows that. What we need is for Upchurch to walk. If he can. I mean, he's a spineless fuck and I heard that it's hard to walk without a spine."

Jessie couldn't help but laugh. "And to think that we voted him in because he said he was one of us," said Jessie. "Believed in the same shit we believed in. Remember what he said during his campaign? That Kentucky and Kentuckians came first. And then he stabs us in the back with that climate vote fiasco. Does he have any idea how many jobs will be lost in this state without the coal business? Every one of those coal miners is a voter."

"And hopefully, come next election, every one of those coal miners will be voting for someone else," added Ellie.

"Doesn't matter," said Jessie. "He's got all that money now, what...sixty million plus this second sixty million...a hundred and twenty f'ing million. I know, it doesn't all go to him, but c'mon, we all know some of it will be coming his way. That's how it works. And that's why he's not worried about losing a few votes. He can buy a lot more votes than he loses."

Elijah was shaking his head. "Not fair. Just not fucking fair. He's getting all this money. And for what? For ruining our lives."

Ellie had come back with the coffee pot and a cup for Elijah. "So, Elijah, didn't I hear you say last time that he should be sharing some of that money?"

Elijah nodded. "Yeah, so?"

"Yeah, smiled Jessie, winking at Ellie. "That's right. I mean, weren't you going to write him a nasty letter or something?"

"Something like that, yeah."

"Guess you haven't done it yet, huh?"

"I'm working on it. I'm working on it."

"Yeah, right," said Jessie, not trying to hide the sarcasm in his voice as he went back to eating his breakfast.

But Elijah didn't take the bait and said nothing. He just sat there, staring into his coffee.

THIRTY-FOUR

“Is it hope that is being inspired by this thing called the Betterment Alliance? Or, is it hate? I think that’s a fairly easy question to answer, and let me answer it for you. It’s hate. And let me tell you why that is.”

That is how Brandon Cumberland started his primetime so-called *news hour* on The Democracy New Network. Roger Meekins had been in Cumberland’s office all afternoon, prepping him for his program.

“People seem to be becoming attracted to this Betterment Alliance thing,” said Meekins. “We can’t have that. Start to give people hope, and you have no idea where it’s going to lead. So here’s what I think you should do tonight on your program. I think you need to somehow conflate hope with hate. I mean, it’s almost the same goddamn word. Four letters, both start with ‘H’ and end with ‘E’. How hard can it be?”

Brandon’s eyes were squinting. Meekins couldn’t help but stare. How in the hell did he do that, he wondered.

“Don’t give me that squinty-eyed, shitty look of yours,” he finally said. “You know damn well what I’m talking about. You are on primetime because your fake sincerity somehow pulls in the numbers. I have no idea how, but... you know better than most that if you want your numbers to stay up, you need to dial up the anger. Dial up the hate. Fuck this hope shit.”

Slowly, Brandon started to smile at Roger.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” said Meekins. You know you’re so good at lying, I don’t even know what you believe anymore. And by the way, coming from me, that’s a compliment.”

Roger started to laugh. As did Brandon.

“Your truth, my truth, Roger, the viewer’s truth. What is truth anymore? We believe that which most fits our agenda, our storyline, our worldview. We live in a post-truth world. Whatever I say tonight will quickly be shared on social media tomorrow. Enough people see it, enough people share it, and it will soon become the truth. The truth is what I tell people it is. Not what it actually is. Facts are no longer relevant. In fact, facts are now just considered opinions.”

“The truth, truthfully told, huh?” smiled Roger. “Just living up to our tagline, right, Brandon, no matter what we say.”

“Like I told you before, Roger, whoever wrote that bullshit line should get a raise,” smiled Brandon.

“Is it hope? Or is it hate?” continued Brandon. He was staring straight at the camera, doing his best to produce his favorite look of sincerity. He had practiced it so long in front of the mirror that it had truly become second nature to him.

“Hope or hate? Well, I would say that buying your way into changing any legislation is certainly showing hate for the democratic process. I mean, democracy is having our politicians elected by the will of the people. It’s through the will of the people that they serve. And they are in office to serve the will of their constituents. That’s democracy.

Now, when someone comes in and bribes them with enormous sums of money to not serve the will of their constituents, then yes, that to me is showing hate for everything this country stands for.”

Cumberland paused to let what he was saying sink into before continuing.

"I know that there are those on the left who say that the GOP is the party that is destroying democracy. That's not true at all. It is greed that is destroying democracy. And this so-called Betterment Alliance is about nothing but greed, not hope."

Roger Meekins was watching from off set. He had to admit, Cumberland was good. He could twist things in a way that almost made sense. That is, if you didn't listen too closely. Fortunately, these days, nobody did. Nobody turned to the news for information anymore. All anyone was looking for now was affirmation.

"After all," continued Cumberland, "if hope is to believe in the impossible, to believe that things will get better, then the only way to do that is to believe in the God almighty. Not to believe in the almighty dollar. Sure, some people, i.e., the Democrats, think the answer is to *buy* our way into a better tomorrow. Look at how they are always talking about raising taxes and more government spending. But the rest of us know the truth and how it works. You don't pay your way into a better tomorrow. You *pray* your way into brighter days. What the other side, what the Betterment Alliance, what they are trying to sell you, isn't hope. It's hate disguised as hope. And hope disguised as dollars. I say no. Put your money away. Open your heart. The only way we can rediscover hope is by eliminating hate. And that always starts right here..." Brandon Cumberland patted his chest..."in your heart. Not your wallet."

THIRTY-FIVE

Normally, the aide for Dick Andrews didn't pay that much attention to the mail that came in. After all, most letters were answered, unread, with the standard reply, already typed up and stamped with Andrew's signature.

But she did stop to read this particular letter. She couldn't tell you why exactly. Just a feeling that she had, that this letter was somehow different. Reading it, she realized that her intuition was right, it was different. A lot different.

She knew that her boss was currently in a meeting with five other Senators to decide which Super PACS they wanted the 120 million dollars from the Betterment Alliance to be distributed to. And she was positive that this one particular letter would have some bearing on that.

She knocked twice on the door and waited to be told to come in. As she entered, she noticed that everyone seemed quite relaxed. Guess getting a free 120 million will do that to you, she thought.

Walking up to her boss's desk she whispered, "Sorry to bother you, sir. But this particular letter seemed pertinent to what you are talking about in this meeting." Dick took the letter, said thanks and indicated that she should leave. She heard them laughing as she shut the door behind her.

Let's see how much longer that lasts, she thought to herself.

While the others continued to joke and laugh amongst themselves, Dick took the letter out of the envelope, opened it, and started to read. When he finished, he slowly looked up at the others. His face had taken on a serious demeanor.

"Think we've got a problem," he said.

"Nothing that 120 million can't solve, I'm sure," one of them joked.

“It’s the 120 million that’s the problem,” said Andrews.

“What? Don’t tell me we’re not going to get it?” one asked, sounding worried. “Those fucking bastards...”

“It’s not that,” said Dick. “It’s that we are being asked to share it.”

All five Senators paused. Share it? “Yeah, right,” one said with a laugh.

“By whom? The Democrats?” joked another.

“No,” said Dick. He saw the smiles start to leave their faces. “By a group that calls themselves Armed and Angry?”

“Armed and what?”

Andrews looked down at the letter again. He wanted to make sure that he had read it right. “Angry. Armed and Angry.”

What the hell is an armed and angry?” asked another. The joviality in the room was now gone.

Dick turned the letter over to see if there was anything written on the back. There wasn’t. He picked up the envelope to see if there was a return address. There wasn’t. “Don’t know,” said Dick. “It’s just that...he held up the letter...that’s what they’re saying.”

Handing the letter over his desk to the Senator sitting closest, he continued. “They are saying that with the recent traitorous actions by someone from our party—and we all know who that one is—the only way that they will register their guns is if they are paid to do so.”

“Yeah, okay. What is it that they want? Twenty bucks? Fifty, maybe, per gun?”

“No, no,” said Dick. “I wish that were it. That would be doable. What they are asking for is three thousand dollars.”

“Per gun?”

Dick Andrews nodded.

Silence came over the room.

"You gotta be kidding," one finally spit out.

"Three thousand per," said another. "Do you have any idea how many unregistered guns there are in this country. Why, there must be millions."

He was quickly corrected by one of the other Senators. "Nope, Stan. Not even close. 'Fraid you're off by just a little."

"Why? What's the number?"

"Over three hundred million."

"Unregistered?"

"'Fraid so."

"Jesus. And they're asking for what? Three thousand per?" said another Senator as he was handed the letter and started reading. He looked up, confused. "And where do they, this group, this Armed and Angry group, I mean, where do they expect us to get that type of money?"

"Keep reading," said Dick. "Whomever wrote it says that he knows of 120 million that we can start with."

It was slowly dawning on all five of the Senators.

"And if we don't?" asked one.

Dick Andrews had gotten out of his chair and walked over to look out the window. Without turning around, he answered. "Well, that's the thing isn't it? The letter leaves that open-ended. It's just signed Armed and Angry."

At about the same time that Dick Andrews' aide was walking the letter into her boss's office, Zach Upchurch's aide was doing the same.

"Sir, I think you should read this," he said, handing the letter to his boss.

Taking the letter, Zach saw that it was typewritten in a very businesslike style. But when he started to read, he saw that what it contained was anything but businesslike. Threats to both he and his family if the 120 million wasn't shared amongst his constituents, and signed by something that called itself Armed and Angry.

"What the fuck," thought Upchurch. The 120 million wasn't even in his control. Yes, he was assuming that *some* of it would siphon down his way, but the RNC and Dick Andrews would determine the Super PAC that actually received the money. And according to the law, the Super PAC, without outside influence, would determine how that money would be spent. Legally, Zach Upchurch could have nothing to do with it.

Apparently, these so-called Armed and Angry people thought otherwise. And it appeared that they were more than willing to carry out extreme measures by threatening harm. At least that's what was implied by signing it Armed and Angry. But what were the extreme measures? That wasn't stipulated in the letter. What it said was that they would gladly register their guns. They just wanted \$3,000 per gun to do so.

Or...

And it was the end of that sentence that was left unanswered.

Or...

Zach, of course, read between the lines. Especially because the writer made a point of mentioning the names of Zach's wife and two daughters in the letter.

This wasn't the way this was supposed to play out. He now realized that bringing his daughters in as his defense for selling out the party on climate had just made them targets.

His aide had come back into the room to tell him that Dick Andrews was on the line. Nodding, he picked up the receiver. Normally, he had no interest in talking with Andrews. But now...

"Dick..."

But before he could say any more, Andrews cut him off. "We just received a letter, Zack, from a group calling themselves Armed and Angry."

"You too, huh?"

"Wait. What? You're familiar with them, then?"

"No, not before ten minutes ago. But I think I just got the same letter myself."

"You did, huh? Interesting. Well, I don't know about you, but the way I read it, Zach, they're threatening us."

"Us? Huh. Really? The letter I received, at least the way I read it, is that they are threatening me and my family if we don't pay them money for registering their guns."

Dick Andrews paused and sighed. "Your family? Huh? I'm sorry to hear that, Zach, truly am. Another pause as Andrews hesitated before continuing.

"But then again, you did kind of bring this on."

Fuck you, Andrews, Zach angrily said to himself. But out loud, to Dick, he said, "Now wait a minute, Dick, wait a minute. We both know that it was 120 million to the Republican coffers. You can't tell me that you don't think that what I did was worth it?"

"Worth it? Well, no. I mean, not if we don't get to fucking see any of it. And *if* we have to pay out three thousand per gun, I'm afraid we won't."

Zach Upchurch scratched his head. He thought he knew what he was hearing, but was he? Certainly, Dick Andrews wasn't thinking about not paying the money.

“Wait a minute, Dick, wait a minute. I mean, you are going to do it right? You’re going to pay. I mean, we’re talking about my family here. The risk...”

“We’re deciding as we speak.”

“Deciding? What the fuck do you mean, deciding, Dick? They threatened my god-damn family. There’s not really a decision here.”

“Maybe, we’re thinking, maybe we should, you know, like call their bluff. See if they’re serious.”

“That’s not funny, Dick.”

“It’s not meant to be funny, Zach. Speaking of family, we’re still not happy with the way that you threatened our family, the GOP family...by voting against us. Kind of hard to act all high and mighty about family now, don’t you think?”

High and mighty? High and fucking mighty? Seriously? There is nothing high and mighty about trying to protect one’s family. Upchurch was close to losing it. Calm down, Zach, calm down, he told himself.

“C’mon, Dick...you can’t be...”

But he didn’t get to finish. He heard the click as Dick Andrews hung up.

“Bastard,” he thought.

THIRTY-SIX

Around the world, people were taking notice of what was happening in the U.S. Not surprisingly, the question on everyone's lips seemed to be *who*, rather than *why*? It was easier to attack a person than a reason or rationale. So everyone's focus was on the who behind the Betterment Alliance. Who was it that was putting up all that money?

When the first \$60 million was offered to pass the climate change legislation, most assumed it was some environmental activist or group. The names of the well-known supporters of the environment were bandied about in the press and debated. No one came forward to claim responsibility.

But, when the Alliance put up \$60 million to change the vote on the gun control legislation, that's when it got interesting. It wasn't just the environment anymore. All of a sudden, it seemed like any piece of legislation could be on the table. And that made the *who* question even more pertinent.

As to the popularity of the movement, polls were being conducted. The consensus was that, in general, people supported what the Alliance was doing, 65% to 35%. As expected, those results were evenly split between the two political parties, with the Democrats having the higher percentage. Those against the Alliance all voiced a similar argument—that using money to buy votes was just another example of the elites destroying democracy in its most egregious and hateful form.

The media also had a hand in it. Deciding which side you were on was heavily reinforced by which major media or social media outlet you frequented. Getting one-sided arguments was now a fact of life when it came to the media. Most people were too busy to take the time to figure out whether

there was any merit to the other side. It was easier to just believe that you were right and they were wrong.

The rest of the world was paying attention for the simple reason that today, politics are pretty much run the same way regardless of the country being talked about. Money is what is used to get things done. The wealthy get their way, regardless of what a politician promised before being elected, no matter the country. Sure, the U.S. proudly bandied about the term 'democracy' as if it were something that still made them special. Under the guise of democracy, the U.S. had taken on a holier-than-thou persona. But the truth was that the brand called *democracy* had lost all meaning. That bubble had burst a long time ago. All the Betterment Alliance was doing was to expose America's so-called brand of democracy for being the hypocrisy that it was.

A hypocrisy that was now being undressed for the whole world to see.

In the past, a corporation would lobby the government to get what was best for its shareholders. Oil companies lobbying to keep their precious oil flowing, even when it is a scientific fact that burning that oil is destroying the planet. It was their responsibility as a public company make money for their shareholders. Their defense was uncomplicated, understood and accepted. If a CEO didn't raise the company's stock price, a new CEO would be found.

As to it being ethical, c'mon, this was business. Their job was to be corporately responsible. Not ethically responsible. Which, for oil companies, meant selling more oil.

But in the last 20 years, the balance of power had shifted. Individuals now had more money than even the largest corporations. And when an uber-wealthy individual could outbid the oil companies of the world, or groups like the NRA for a legislator's vote, that upset the playing field.

The wealthy individual wasn't lobbying to fulfill his, or her, corporate responsibilities. No, the person now with the power, i.e. the money, had no guideposts, either ethically or legally, to behave in a certain way.

They could buy *whoever* they wanted.

To get *whatever* they wanted.

This was a new paradigm that the world was still trying to figure out how to deal with. Which is why everyone was watching to see how it would play out in the U.S.

And yet still, everyone seemed to be asking the wrong question. Who was behind the Betterment Alliance? Who?

Ignoring the even more important question.

Why were they doing it?

THIRTY-SEVEN

"I sent the letter."

Elijah was sitting next to Jessie, once again starting their day with breakfast at Ellie's. Both had already started digging into their food.

"You did what? Really? C'mon. No way," sputtered Jessie, putting down his knife and fork.

Elijah was grinning ear to ear. "I did, I did, I did."

Looking over at Elijah, Jessie could only shake his head. He hadn't seen Elijah this giddy for some time. "I thought you said that you were going to wait."

Elijah shrugged his shoulders. "Why wait?" he asked as he looked over at Jessie, surprised to see that he was looking a bit worried. "I mean, you said you thought it was a good letter when you read it."

Jessie nodded. "I said it was interesting. But I thought that, well, you know, that it needed some work."

"That's not what you said."

"Because I didn't think you'd actually send it, Elijah."

"Well, too late. I did. It's gone."

Ellie came over with the coffee pot to freshen up their cups. "So what are you two talking about?"

Elijah again started giggling like a schoolboy who just pulled off a prank and didn't get caught. "Nothing. Nothing."

"He sent the letter to Upchurch."

"You didn't," said Ellie, shaking her head.

"I did. And not just to Upchurch."

Now both turned to look at Elijah.

“I also sent one to the head of the GOP.”

Jessie could only shake his head. “And really, you asked for three thousand a gun?”

Elijah was confused. When they talked about it a few days earlier, it seemed that both Jessie and Ellie were excited and on board. Why did they look so worried now? “But that’s what we agreed on, Jessie,” he said. “Right here. Just a few days ago. I mean, Ellie heard it. Right? It was you who said that we need to stand up for our rights.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t say send it. At least, not yet,” said Jessie. “And the three thousand? I mean, that was just a pipe dream. No one is going to take you seriously asking for three thousand a gun.”

Ellie shrugged her shoulders. “What’s done is done, I guess. And, well, we could probably all use the money. At least, I know I could.”

“But it’s only going to work if a lot of people know about it and go out and ask for the three grand,” said Jessie. “I mean, it can’t just be the three of us. C’mon, you know politicians. They get a letter like that, and they just bury it. Claim it never existed. People need to force their hand and go out and ask for the money. And I mean a lot of people.” He turned to stare at Elijah. “Have you thought about that, Mr Smartypants?”

Elijah was nodding and smiling, again ear to ear. Little did they know that he had thought it all through. “I thought we’d let Cumberland tell everybody.”

“Cumberland?” Now Ellie was confused. “Brandon Cumberland? You mean the guy on the DNN? How in the hell is he going to tell people, Elijah? I mean, Cumberland doesn’t even know about the damn letter.”

Jessie paused. Slowly, it was dawning on him. As it was on Ellie.

“Wait...” said Ellie. “You didn’t...”

When they both turned to look at Elijah, they knew he didn't have to answer the question. His look said it all.

Yep. Cumberland got a letter, too.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Normally, when an ad campaign gets the kind of attention that the Betterment Alliance campaign was getting, the ad trades are all over it. Wanting to know who did it and how much it cost, they try to interview both the agency and the client who paid for it.

Especially if it's a campaign as controversial as the now-infamous Bribe Campaign.

But Nicholas and Anthony were keeping a profile that was both low and quiet. A profile that was starting to piss Anthony off.

"I don't think I've done a campaign that has gotten this much press before," he said to Nicholas. They were sharing drinks at Specs, a small alley bar in San Francisco, frequented by those in the creative community. It seemed that everyone they overheard in the bar was talking about the commercials that the Betterment Alliance had run.

"Keep your voice down," whispered Nicholas. It was a small place, and he didn't want anyone to hear what they were talking about. "If there was one thing that Holt said was important, it was to keep who is behind it a mystery."

"Yeah, but he was talking about himself, the money behind it, not us, the creators," said Anthony. "Why can't we let people know that we did it without mentioning who's paying for it?"

'Cause it never works that way. You know that. Shit gets leaked. If they know about us, the trail will ultimately lead back to Holt. He doesn't want that to happen. So we have to stay quiet and say nothing to nobody."

"But at *some* time we need to," continued Anthony. "I mean, the world wants to know, hell, the world *should* know who put up \$120 million. Have you asked our lovely Logan where she is on this?"

Nicholas nodded. "She's been asking me what the reveal is going to be. And when. How we intend to let the world know that it's Holt behind the campaign."

"See. So I'm not the only one. And?"

"And...and the fuck if I know, Anthony. Can you imagine the field day that people like Brandon Cumberland would have, knowing that it's Warren Holt? Right now, the world is starting to think that something is going right. Finally. They don't know exactly why that is. Or, who's behind it. But *something* is happening. Something they can put their hope behind. If we reveal who it is, the message gets all diluted. I mean, right now...what we're doing...it's like a magic trick. Magic works through deception and misdirection. Once you know how the trick is done, the magic is gone. No, I think we need to keep the misdirection going for a bit longer."

A woman had come up to the bar and taken the empty seat next to Anthony. Early thirties. Extremely attractive. She looked at Anthony and smiled.

"Hi, Anthony," she said. "Been a while."

Anthony turned. Seeing who it was, his flirtatious smile broke out. "It sure has," said Anthony. Seeing Anthony's reaction, Nicholas immediately knew that Anthony had forgotten her name. Reaching across his friend, he stuck out his hand. "Hi, I'm Nicholas."

"Alexa," she replied, shaking his hand. "Nice to meet you."

"How do you two know each other, Anthony?" Nicholas asked, knowing full well that this would embarrass Anthony just a little. Anthony shot him a glare and then turned back to Alexa.

"Alexa was an art director at, at, at...at..."

"Goodby."

“Goodby, right. Still there or...”

“Nope. Freelance now.” She smiled at Nicholas and then back at Anthony as she elbowed him in the arm. “This guy and I were working together, pretty closely, on a project...”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s right,” said Anthony, “a lot of late nights if I remember correctly.”

She smiled coyly and nodded. “Yes, there were those.”

“Nicholas could only shake his head. “Yeah, I bet there were.”

She put her hand on Anthony’s. “You doing anything interesting now?” she asked,

“Well,” started Anthony, “have you seen the...”

Nicholas jabbed him in the ribs.

“Ow, what the hell, Nicholas?”

“Sorry,” he said to Anthony. Then to Alexa, “It’s just that the project he was going to mention is kind of confidential, you know...NDA...that sort of shit.”

“Yep. Not a problem. Been there. Understand,” she said.

Nicholas saw that Alexa’s hand had somehow found its way down to Anthony’s thigh. “But what I don’t understand is why you stopped calling me, Anthony?”

“Um, yeah, that...” Anthony stuttered.

Nicholas smiled. Typical Anthony. He knew he couldn’t stop him from going home with Alexa. Hell, he’d go home with Alexa if her hand were on his thigh.

His only concern was how much Anthony would say.

“Getting late. Think I’m going to leave you two,” said Nicholas, slowly pushing himself up off the stool and away from the bar. Standing behind

Anthony, he leaned forward to whisper in his ear. "Gotta remind you, buddy, of our confidentiality agreement."

Anthony looked at him, a bit confused.

Nicholas nodded at Alexa as he put his finger to his lips.

"Oh, that, yeah. Got it," nodded Anthony. He smiled. "Don't worry, Nic. If I remember Alexa, I don't think talking is what she has in mind."

THIRTY-NINE

If you looked around Brandon Cumberland's office, you would immediately notice how tidy it was. Everything seemed to have a place and was properly put away. The only thing that seemed out of place in an office this neat and tidy was the pile of mail off to the left side of his desk. Brandon Cumberland got a lot of fan mail. More than any other anchor on the Democratic News Network. Of course, most of it was digital—emails—but he also got an unusual amount of snail mail. He liked that. He liked seeing it pile up. He enjoyed being able to use the snail mail as a prop when he went in to talk salary with Meekins. It made a good impression, carrying in a basket of fan mail that was more or less saying how great he was. The way he looked at it, every letter was a rating point. Which meant every letter meant more money coming into Meekins and his network. Which in turn meant more money for Cumberland. Even so, he always felt that he deserved more.

After all, he *was* the star, wasn't he?

But this letter, this one particular letter that was just delivered via registered mail, this letter represented more than just a rating point. This letter was more like a thousand rating points. The question now going through Cumberland's mind was...how best to play it?

He could run into Meekins's office, show him the letter, and get his advice. Or, he could wait until his program that evening and let Meekins find out at the same time as the nation that certain constituents were not only getting pissed off at their elected representatives, but that they were armed and angry enough to do something about it.

He thought about it for some time before deciding on the latter approach. Just a little revenge, he thought, for Meekins not letting him know

about the second bribe commercial before it ran on his program. Asshole. Well, guess what? Two can play at that game.

The only question he didn't have the answer to was *how* he should play the reveal. Which side should he be on? The side of the angry constituents, that hell yes, they should share in the money that their Senator got for stabbing them in the back and voting for both the climate and the gun control legislation? Or, the side of law and order? The side that said that nobody should be allowed to threaten a Senator.

He didn't have to think long. The question really was which direction would most further his brand? Make *him* the story as much as the letter itself. And hell, the answer to that was easy. In fact, it really wasn't a decision, was it, when you looked at it that way.

He read the letter again, making sure that he didn't miss anything. The request was for three thousand dollars for every gun that was brought in to be registered. Quickly, he Googled how many guns there were in the U.S. Holy shit, he thought to himself when he saw the number—almost four hundred million.

Assuming that most of those gun owners, maybe three-quarters of those who owned guns, were Republicans, and say two-thirds of those guns were unregistered, the cost to register that many guns would exceed four hundred billion dollars. Well, that just wasn't going to happen was it.

So, how should the Republicans respond to this threat—that was the question, really, wasn't it? And getting an answer to that question is the direction that he knew he would take with his broadcast. They did have a hundred and twenty million free dollars given to them by the Betterment Alliance. Why not just donate that to the gun registration cause on a first-come, first-served basis? Of course, at three thousand per, a hundred and

twenty million would disappear quickly, so perhaps it would have to be less per gun. But even less would be more than enough for a lot of the people.

And truth be told, he actually thought registration wasn't a bad idea. Not that he'd ever say that on air. But yes, if he pushed for registration that *paid* the people, *his* people, his viewers, it would look like he was on their side, working to get them money for something that the law was now saying they would *have* to do anyway.

In fact, if he positioned it just so, it might be a great plank in the platform he was already starting to build for when he would run for the Oval. A man of the people. Working for the people. Making them money. Telling it to them straight. Yeah, that would play well, he thought.

He read the letter again. Armed and Angry. Yeah, he liked that. And no, Meekins didn't need to know about it. Not yet, anyways.

Tonight's program will be soon enough.

FORTY

“So that’s what she’s up to, huh?” said Roger Meekins. “Interesting.”

He was on the phone, talking to Timothy Coffee, finding out the latest on what Coffee had dug up on Logan Jamison. Coffee had a few of his goons trailing Jamison for a month. By now, they knew where she lived, where she went, and who she saw. Hell, they even knew whether she flossed her teeth at night or not. What most interested Meekins, though was that of the different addresses she frequented, one more frequently than the others. The house owned by one Warren Holt.

“Bingo!” thought Meekins. Jamison is the only name associated with the Betterment Alliance, and Jamison is spending a lot of time with the one and only Warren Holt—the world’s fifth richest man. Interesting. He had found it strange that, to date, no one had come forward to claim credit for the Betterment Alliance. But with this new information, it was starting to make sense. He understood how wealthy individuals who donated large amounts of money liked to stay out of the public eye. Especially, someone like Holt.

But the Betterment Alliance was getting such rave reviews. People seemed to like it. Or, at least the *idea* of it. Of course, Meekins knew that these same people would hate it if that kind of money were publicly being spent to influence something they disagreed with. If say that amount of money was used to sway policy away from what was the will of the majority. If it was used to only influence the narrow interests of those with billions of dollars and their cronies. In other words, as dark money has been doing for years.

But he had to admit, the Betterment Alliance, as much as he hated it, was playing it smart. So far, only influencing policies that were supported by the majority of voters. Its whole premise was that it was just balancing out the

dark money that was maintaining the policies that went against the will of the majority.

Yeah, well fuck that. He knew that the only way to keep bringing in viewers was to create anger and outrage. And to do this, he had to position the Betterment Alliance—something his viewers already despised—as an existential threat to democracy. To keep pushing the lie to conservatives that their rights were being abused. That the elites were buying influence and directing policy that, in effect, undermined the democratic process.

He knew that this was what his viewers believed anyway. And if he told them what they already believed, they would not only stay angry but keep nodding and agreeing. But even more importantly, watching.

It was one of his older, gray-haired female viewers who had set him straight on this a few years back. Back when he was still naive enough to believe that news should be unbiased. Back when he thought that to be fair, a news network should be obliged to tell both sides of a story. Yeah, that was a while back, he thought.

Until the way this particular viewer put it changed his view of news forever.

“Well, you know, Mr Meekins,” she said. “I’m not going to watch a news program that doesn’t reflect my views. I mean, that would just be wasting my time, wouldn’t it? And for the life of me, I don’t know why I would want to do that?”

Yes, Meekins thought. Why indeed?

FORTY-ONE

"You did what?"

"I didn't mean to, but..."

"Jesus, Anthony..."

They were at a coffee shop on Fillmore Street, close to Nicholas' condo. Anthony had come in looking exhausted. Not to mention, a little guilty. It didn't take long before he confessed.

"We went back to my place and...you know...well, when Alexa brought up the Betterment Alliance, how it was such a great campaign and how it's all anyone in the industry was talking about..."

"...you wanted to brag," Nicholas cut in, finishing Anthony's sentence.

"Yeah, fuck, I mean, you saw what she looked like. Of course, I wanted to brag."

"Damn it, Anthony, you know it's going to start now, the calls...the press." Anthony looked away and took a deep breath. His guilty look got even worse.

Seeing Anthony's face, Nicholas knew. "Don't tell me."

"Yep. I'm already getting some," Anthony said sheepishly. "From the trades."

"You're not answering, I hope. Please, God, tell me you're not..."

"No, no, not answering them. Swear to God. Going straight to voicemail."

"Well, if they now know about you, they're going to soon know about me. And after that, they'll connect us straight to Warren Holt."

Nicholas' phone started to vibrate. Picking it up, he looked at the screen and then held it out for Anthony to see.

It was from Ad Age, an advertising publication.

“Fuck. Even faster than I thought,” hissed Nicholas, refusing the call. “All right, it means we need to reveal Holt sooner than we wanted to. I mean, it’s either them or us doing it. And I’d rather it be us.”

“Sorry,” murmured Anthony.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” said Nicholas. It was the way it always worked with Anthony. His little head always did the thinking. Nicholas paused before turning to look at Anthony.

Seeing his hangdog expression, Nicholas had to smile.

“So, tell me, Anthony. Was it worth it? I mean, I sure as hell hope that for all the trouble it’s going to cause, that it was fucking worth it.”

“Oh, baby,” smiled Anthony, brightening up. “Was it ever.”

FORTY-TWO

“There seems to be a group in this country that is calling themselves Armed and Angry.” That’s the way Brandon Cumberland started his nightly news program. In his hand, he was holding up a letter.

“And apparently, at least according to this letter that I recently received, what they are angry about is that some of our GOP Senators seem to be selling out to the liberal, progressive elites. And when I say selling out, I do mean that literally. So far, one hundred and twenty million dollars has come into the GOP coffers for voting yes on what the progressives want. And while I don’t know about you, I don’t think that is why we put them in office. So, here’s the question. Will there be still more traitorous actions coming? That we don’t know. What we do know is that all it took to make that 120 million was for a couple of GOP Senators, wait, let me correct that, *one* GOP Senator in particular, to abandon his constituents’ wishes on the issues of climate change and gun control.”

As was usually the case, Roger Meekins was watching Cumberland’s show from the control booth. Normally, he knew where Cumberland’s shows would lead. After all, they would have discussed it the afternoon of the show. But they didn’t this time. He didn’t know why? Now he did. So where in the hell was Cumberland going with this, he thought to himself? And where in the hell had that letter come from? And why hadn’t he seen it before this?

“This is a letter that was sent not only to me, mind you, but to both Dick Andrews, the GOP minority leader, and Zack Upchurch, your favorite rogue Senator from Kentucky. A picture came up of Zach, smiling with his wife and two daughters. It wasn’t necessary to show Upchurch’s family, Cumberland

knew that. But even so, he specifically requested it, thinking it would twist the knife in that much deeper.

“You remember Zack, the man who has sold conservatives down the river not just once, but twice now. There he is with his wife and daughters. Beautiful family, aren’t they?”

Reading from the letter, Cumberland continued.

“Well, according to this group that, like I said, is calling themselves Armed and Angry, they think that some of this hundred and twenty million should be shared. With them. And here is how they think it should be done. Since gun registration will now become mandatory—thank you, once again, Mr Upchurch—they would like the GOP to pay them three thousand dollars for every gun that they register. If not, well, as they signed their letter, they are not only angry. But armed. Now, what does that mean? I don’t know. Nobody knows. All that I know is how the letter was signed. Do they have a point? That’s an interesting question, isn’t it.”

Roger Meekins was tapping his fingers on the console in the control booth. If Cumberland kept going where he seemed to be going with this, arguing that the money should be shared among the GOP constituents for registering guns, that would mean only one thing. Most of that hundred and twenty million would not be coming to him to pay for GOP advertising on his network. And that was not something he was going to stand for. He saw that they were less than a minute from a commercial break. He got up. Time to talk to Cumberland.

“But more on that in a moment when we return,” said Brandon Cumberland to the cameras. As the network cut to a commercial break, Cumberland turned to see Roger Meekins walking in, just as he expected.

“Roger, what a surprise. You don’t usually come on set.”

“What the fucking fuck was that?” yelled Meekins as he walked up to Cumberland’s desk. Cumberland had seen Roger mad before, but not quite like this. “You want that one hundred and twenty million to go to pay for gun registrations rather than for advertising on this network? Are you not expecting a raise from this network next year, Cumberland?”

But Brandon wasn’t paying attention to what Meekins was saying. Instead, he was looking off-set at his producer, flashing him a thumbs up. Brandon nodded to his producer and then, finally, turned his attention over to Meekins.

“Roger, Roger,” cut in Cumberland, trying to calm him down. “Roger, hear me out. Dick Andrews is our next interview.”

Meekins paused. This was also news to him. He shook his head. This was going from bad to worse. Nothing is ever news to him on his news program.

“Andrews? What the fuck! Why didn’t I know about this?” fumed Meekins. “You know that I approve all interviews.”

“Well, the truth is, Roger, we just got him,” Cumberland replied. “We called him before the broadcast. Told him that he might want to watch the intro. Well, guess he saw that I also had a copy of the letter that he got because he just called and said, yes, he wants to be on.”

“But, but...what’s he going to say?” Meekins stammered.

“I wish I knew,” Roger. I swear to God I wish I knew.”

When Dick Andrews got the call from Cumberland’s producer suggesting that he might find tonight’s program of interest, he was more than a little surprised. It was Meekins who always gave him a heads-up before he

was asked to be on the program, not a host's producer. And it was usually more than a heads-up. It was a concise brief explaining *exactly* what Meekins wanted him to say.

If people only knew, he thought, how the whole fucking thing is staged. How Meekins runs it like fucking Leonard Bernstein up in front of an orchestra. We'll ask this, you say that. Meekins knew all the buzzwords that would get his viewers angry and keep them tuning in. The reason that Andrews and the other politicians usually went along with Meekins is that airtime to a politician was like gold. The more times he was on Meekins' network, the more money seemed to come his way when election time rolled around.

But this time it was Cumberland's producer who reached out. Strange. That's never happened before. But then when Andrews started watching the program, he understood why. How in the hell did Cumberland get a copy of the fucking letter, he thought? Did Upchurch send it to him? No, that didn't make any sense. Why would Upchurch want people to know that he was being threatened? Hell, most people would probably agree that Upchurch *should* be threatened. But that wasn't the only question he couldn't answer. The big one was—where was Cumberland going with this?

Andrews adjusted his tie and suit jacket and sat down in his chair in front of his computer. He had shorts on under his jacket, but hell, all anybody ever saw was from the waist up. He checked his computer. Was the computer's camera on? Yep. Okay. Microphone? Yep. He could hear Cumberland's producer counting down in his ear. "Four, three, two, one." He was on the air.

"Dick, good to see you," Cumberland started.

"And you, Brandon, and you."

“This letter, Dick, I heard that you received one just like it, is that correct? From a group calling themselves Armed and Angry.”

Dick Andrews nodded. “Yes, I did. Just a few days ago, I believe.”

“As did I,” continued Cumberland. “So the question, Dick, is...what do you think of their proposal? From the way I read it, they think that the GOP, the party that you, Dick, are the leader of, screwed them over on the most recent two pieces of legislation, and now they want a cut of the riches—the hundred and twenty million your party hauled in from that. In a way, that seems fair, doesn’t it, Dick?”

Aha, so that’s where Cumberland was going with this, Andrews thought. Taking the side of the people versus the party. Well, the rumor was that Cumberland had political aspirations. Made sense. He’s playing for votes. Okay, then, hell, two can play at that game.

“I’m glad you asked, Brandon,” started Andrews. “But first off, I must clarify, it wasn’t our party that got the money. It was a Super Pac and as you well know, Brandon, Super Pacs cannot coordinate with us at all.”

Brandon Cumberland worked hard to hide the smirk that was starting to slip out across his face. “If you say so, Dick, sure.”

Dick Andrews tried to look serious. “Yes, yes, I do say so. No coordination. But if you ask me, Brandon, and we’re just talking hypothetically here, of course, but if you ask me, I think that’s exactly what the Super Pac should be doing with that money.”

Cumberland brought out the little squint that he used to show that he is surprised. But this time the squint was real. This wasn’t the answer that he was expecting.

And the fact was, Dick Andrews was surprised that he even said it. After all, he had not yet talked to a Super PAC, or his fellow Senators about what to

do with the money. Obviously, he was hoping to use a lot of that money for his own campaign down the road. But if he could sway a few voters here, by giving them money for doing something that they would now be required by law to do anyway, well, that would win him votes as well, right?

“So you want to give away three thousand dollars for each gun registration? Really?”

“Well, as you know, Brandon, let me just say that for starters, we don’t think violence is the way to solve anything.”

Cumberland nodded, but had to fight hard to keep his confused squint from breaking into a wide smile. Hell, the Republican party had practically gone out of their way to arm every one of their constituents in the country by constantly weakening any gun control laws. They *wanted* their supporters armed and carrying weapons in public. An armed citizenry does wonders to intimidate others. Just the threat of violence is usually enough. Especially at the polling booths. So, to then have the head of the GOP proclaim that they are anti-violence. And to do it with such a straight face. Yes, Andrews was good. Really good. Cumberland almost had to admire that.

“Because to sign the letter armed and angry, well, that implies violence,” continued Andrews. “That said, we think that what they are asking for...well, let me put it this way, we think that while their strategy is right, it’s the execution that needs a little tweaking. Three thousand a gun,” Andrews was shaking his head, “I mean there are a lot of unregistered guns currently in our country. At three thousand per, I’m afraid that we would run out of money in no time.”

Unless you raised taxes, thought Cumberland to himself. And, of course, that’s not something the GOP would even consider. Giving his patented squint

to the camera, he continued. "So then, what exactly am I hearing you say, Dick? That you have a counter offer?"

Andrews was nodding. "As a matter of fact, we, and by we I mean a few of us, have been talking it over, and what we thought would be fair would be something more along the lines of one hundred dollars for a handgun and three hundred for a larger caliber weapon, like an AR15."

A slight whistle slipped past Brandon Cumberland's lips. Quickly, he picked up his pen and started scribbling some numbers on the piece of paper in front of him. "Let me see, even at just one hundred a gun, you have a hundred and twenty million to give out, that means you could register one point two million guns. But there are, as I'm sure you know, Dick, a lot more unregistered guns than that."

"I know, Brandon, I know. But if we're talking the one hundred and twenty million, then the amount of money we have to spend on this is limited, which I'm sure you understand. So I guess it would have to be a first-come, first-served kind of thing."

"First-come, first-served? Really?" Again, the squint. "Do you think that's fair to your constituents? I mean, now that our government is legally mandating that people register their guns, forcing them to do something that they put you in office to make sure that they would never be forced to do, I mean, if that's the case, then shouldn't *anybody* who registers a gun get the money? And not just those who get there first."

"Well, if we had the money..."

Andrews was stalling. He felt himself starting to sweat. Cumberland was pushing him into a corner, and he was giving answers that he hadn't yet discussed with anyone. Fuck. This could hurt his minority leadership position.

“I think, I think that if the program works in these initial stages, if the public likes it, then it’s something that Congress can budget more money for in the future.”

“Really? H’mph, have you talked this over with the Armed and Angry people yet? I mean, if you’re going to create a new budget with Congress, then you could budget for more than a hundred a gun, I would imagine, right?”

Dick Andrews frowned. That question didn’t help. And here he thought Meekins’ network was supposed to be on his side. Not against him. Trying to compose himself, he continued.

“No, no, we haven’t, we haven’t talked it over yet with anyone, neither Congress nor this Armed and Angry group. But since everyone seems to watch your show, Brandon, I’m sure that we will be hearing from the Armed and Angry people shortly.”

Brandon smiled slightly. Yes, everyone did watch his show. At least, everyone who voted Republican. Which is why he was feeling so confident that yes, maybe now would be a good time to throw his hat into the ring.

FORTY-THREE

The one thing that Dick Andrews was correct about was that everyone did watch Cumberland's program. Jessie, Ellie, and Elijah included.

One hundred dollars was a far cry from the three thousand per gun that Elijah had asked for. But as they all gathered together in Ellie's diner the next morning, all three came to the same conclusion. One hundred was one hundred times better than nothing.

"It's not what you asked for," said Ellie to Elijah, but still, we get something for just doing what we now legally have to do anyway."

"If...we move fast," chimed in Jessie. Everyone's going to be hearing about this and will be running out to get the cash. I mean, it was all anyone was talking about on the radio driving in this morning. In fact, even we might miss out."

"You know, I never threatened anyone in the letter," said Elijah. "Yes, I signed it Armed and Angry. But you guys know, right, I didn't do it as a threat. I mean, I'm angry. But it's not about hurting anybody."

"We know," said Ellie, "you're a little pussycat. But if people took it that way, so what?"

"Exactly," said Jessie. "At least it got them off their asses and moving forward. And I've been doing the math. At a C-note per handgun, three hundred for an AR15, I've got, let me see, one, two, three, four, five, six...shit, six guns, two of those being higher-caliber...that's about a thousand bucks that I could really use right about now."

"But you wouldn't register them all, would you?" asked Ellie. "I mean, maybe having one or two not in the record books of the US government might be a good idea. Just saying, you know."

“Yeah, maybe,” said Jessie. “I’m gonna have to think about it. But I could use the bucks.”

The next day, the line-ups started all across the country. Even before the government had a system in place, or any money available, people were bringing in their guns to police stations and courthouses. Everyone wanted the cash before the cash ran out, even though there wasn’t any cash to pay anyone with yet.

When they asked for the money, they were all told to go home, a system of payment still had to be set up. They left, but they weren’t happy.

Social media even gave the whole fiasco a snarky name. The Armed & Angry Repayment Plan—AARP. Or in other words, since the Republicans were threatening to cancel Social Security, some were already considering this to be the alternative Republican retirement plan.

Up in Seattle, Logan Jamison was watching the turn of events with an ironic interest. It seemed that not only would gun owners across the country soon be getting money, but the Betterment Alliance was also now hauling it in. She first didn’t understand why Nicholas wanted to include a way to pay money to the Alliance when they originally set up the website. But now, seeing the amount of money coming in, she was glad they did. Sure, a few people contributed after the climate change vote. But the donations had increased tenfold once the gun legislation passed. Ten dollars here, fifty dollars there... occasionally, a hundred or five hundred dollars was being donated. One anonymous donor put in twenty thousand. Another, fifty grand. She found most of the smaller donations came along with a note. *Thanks for reviving*

hope that all isn't lost. Hopefully (no pun intended), this will help you continue the good work.

It was almost enough to make her cry. She remembered what someone once told her—action builds hope. And then, hope inspires more action. Granted, she wasn't too sure about this whole hope campaign when it started. But, by God, it seemed to be working. As for registering her gun, no, that wasn't going to happen. Not with her feeling that she was constantly being followed. Nope. If she needed to put somebody down, she didn't want anyone to be able to trace the weapon that did it back to her.

She heard her phone start to vibrate on the table next to her. Picking it up, she was relieved to see that it was Nicholas calling and not some stalking maniac.

"Nicholas, you know not many have this number. What's up?"

"Fraid we got a problem."

Logan paused. This isn't what she was expecting, or wanted, to hear.

"And you say that, why?"

"You told me that they know that you are part of the Betterment Alliance, right?"

"Yeah, they must, I mean, I don't know any other reason why people would be following me around and breaking into my place. I told you, it's why I changed my number."

"Well, I think soon they're going to know that Warren is part of it, too."

"Again, you say that why?"

Nicholas hesitated. He didn't want to throw Anthony and his big mouth under the bus. What good would that do? "You're just gonna have to trust me on this one," he finally said. "But it means we need to move fast."

"Fast? In regard to what?"

“In regard to announcing Warren's introduction to the world. We need to do it sooner rather than later. Before somebody else does it for us.”

“Before someone else does it?” She didn’t know what he was talking about, but she did know one thing.

“I don’t think Warren's going to like that.”

“Yeah, I know. “But here’s the thing. I don’t think he’s going to like my idea as to how we do it, either.”

FORTY-FOUR

It didn't take long for the trade press to out both Nicholas and Anthony as the creators of the campaign behind the Betterment Alliance. The two of them had already discussed who would be the best to handle the reporters. It wasn't a difficult decision. Anthony knew that he got too wound up when talking to reporters. Too emotional. Too apt to let something slip. That left Nicholas as the only option.

Which explains why he had been on the phone all morning taking questions in his condo from the different trade rags. At the moment, it was Advertising Age on the phone with him.

"So what you're saying, Nicholas," queried the reporter, "is that you won't tell us the source of the funding behind the Betterment Alliance?"

"We will be announcing that soon," Nicholas replied. "But no, at the moment, I think that it is best if that stays unknown."

"But why?" continued the reporter. "Whomever or whatever is financing the Betterment Alliance appears to be doing something good for society. Something people like. You would think that they would want the credit and the praise for being responsible for that, wouldn't you?"

"I can't say anything more now," said Nicholas. "But if you go to the Betterment Alliance website in a week or so, you will find out what our next steps will be."

And with that, Nicholas hung up on the reporter.

Anthony looked at him curiously. "Nicholas, what the fuck? What do you mean the website's going to say what the next steps are?"

“Do we have a choice, Anthony? I called Logan. She is on her way down, flying into town. We need to introduce Holt now as the money behind all of this. But we need to do it on our terms.”

“And our terms are?”

“I have an idea, but it’s not really any good. Logan’s on her way to town now, to discuss it.”

“Ah, shit. Don’t tell her I’m the one that fucked up, okay? I mean, I don’t want the girl not to like me.”

They both heard the buzzing at the same time—the front door.

“Looks like you’ll be able to tell her yourself,” said Nicholas as he headed down the stairs to let Logan in. Anthony wasn’t far behind him.

When Nicholas opened the door, Logan entered with a flourish.

“So who in the hell fucked up?” was the first thing out of her mouth. Nicholas had to admit that she was even more attractive when she was angry. Or was it that she was even more attractive this time? He couldn’t put his finger on it exactly until he saw her look up and smile. What the fuck, he thought.

Turning around, he saw what she was looking at. Anthony, coming down the stairs to join them.

“So what do you think?” asked Nicholas.

He was sitting on the couch across from Logan and Anthony in the main room of his condo. Both were hearing his idea for the website for the first time. Both looked equally confused.

Looking over at Logan, Anthony shrugged his shoulders. He wasn't sure. "You really think it will work?" he asked. "I mean, introducing Holt as a man of the people seems to be a stretch, Nicholas. He's a fucking uber godzillionaire."

Logan's look said that she, too, wasn't certain. Shaking her head, she said, "It's risky as hell. I mean that doesn't make it bad, but..."

Nicholas could only agree. "You're right. It is risky," agreed Nicholas. "And that's exactly what I think makes it good. My question is, how will Warren see it?"

Standing up, Logan started pacing around the room. "As you know, as Anthony said, he's not a man of the people. He's Warren fucking Holt. The last thing he would want is to be presented as something he's not. Correction, the last thing he would want is to be revealed as part of this at all."

"Well," chimed in Anthony sheepishly, "afraid that's a bit impossible to avoid now. They know you," he said nodding towards Logan, "and now, the press is on to us. Figuring out that it's Warren is the next logical step. And it's going to happen sooner rather than later."

"They do know me," said Logan. "In fact, it felt like I was being followed flying here today. I wouldn't be surprised if someone is outside watching us right now."

Anthony looked over at Nicholas. A worried look was on both their faces.

"As for the press," continued Logan, "and you two, yes, how in the hell did that happen by the way? I mean, me I understand. I started the 501(c)(3). I could be traced. But you two promised me that you would stay unknown."

"Advertising reporters are a persistent bunch, I'm afraid," said Anthony, trying to act dumb. "They have a good way of undressing the truth."

Nicholas couldn't help but roll his eyes at Anthony. The only undressing that fucked this up was on his part.

“But you, I’m worried about you,” said Anthony to Logan. “If you’re being followed, then you shouldn’t be alone, not while you’re here in San Francisco.”

Logan shrugged her shoulders, trying to make it seem as if it was no big deal. “It’s alright. I’m a big girl. Taken care of myself my entire life,” she smiled. “Gotten rather used to it. And, rather good at it. Besides, I’m probably just being a bit paranoid.”

Nicholas had gotten up and wandered over towards the large window facing the street. Pulling the blinds back a bit, he noticed that there was a car out on the street. The lights were off, but a profile of a man in the driver’s seat was lit up by the light from his cellphone.

“Afraid you weren’t paranoid. There is a car out there, and I can see that there is a man in it. He could be an Uber picking somebody up, or...”

“Or, he could be someone trailing Logan,” shouted Anthony, angrily. “Shit. Nope, that does it. I insist. I’ve got a spare room at my place. You’re gonna stay there while you’re in town and help Nicholas and me figure out how to get Warren to buy into our, I mean, Nicholas’ idea.”

Logan started to protest, but Nicholas cut her off.

“No, Anthony makes sense, Logan,” Nicholas agreed. “The thing is that we need to get Warren’s buy-in fast. I mean, whoever is in that car and traced you to here has now also traced you to us.”

FORTY-FIVE

The man lit up by the light on his phone inside the car outside Nicholas' condo was working for Timothy Coffee. He had just hung up on Coffee, telling him where Logan Jamison was. Well, at least the address of the building that he saw her enter. Once she was inside, he waited five minutes before going into the lobby and counting the mailboxes. Ten. So, ten units in the building. Which one Logan was visiting, that he didn't know.

But ten wasn't a large number, and he had a hunch that Timothy Coffee could find out who lived in each one. Which is why he was on the phone. Before hanging up, Coffee had told him to stay where he was and follow Jamison if and when she came out.

He didn't have to wait long. But this time, Jamison wasn't alone. Whomever she was with led her to a car parked up the street, a half a block in front of him. He had to smile when he saw the man hold the passenger side door open for her while she got in. Ah, chivalry, he thought. What an old-fashioned, wasted gesture.

He stopped smiling when he saw Anthony pause and stare over at him. He crouched down a bit further in the driver's seat. At first, he thought that Anthony was going to walk over, maybe confront him, but then, thankfully, he seemed to change his mind and walked back to his car. Keep cool, the man thought to himself as he peered over the steering wheel. Keep cool. And now that they seem to know that Logan's being followed, he had better keep a lower profile. He pretended not to stare as he watched Anthony drive off and turn the corner. Once Anthony's car was out of sight, he started up his own car and headed out.

Tailing someone is an art. It takes practice. Especially if you don't want them to know they're being followed. It's easier if the person you are following isn't in the 'game', so to speak. Anthony wasn't. When he didn't see the car that was parked outside Nicholas' building start up when he pulled out, he relaxed a little.

Still, he drove across town quickly, occasionally glancing in the rearview. Nope. Didn't seem to be any cars following them. Good. It wasn't far from Nicholas' condo in Pacific Heights to his place in the Haight. Logan wasn't saying much, just looking at the Victorians they were driving by. Shit, I'm more worried than she seems to be, Anthony thought to himself. He liked that—a woman who didn't scare easily. Pulling into the driveway of a Victorian, he told Logan to sit for a minute. He watched out his rear window to see if any suspicious cars went by. Didn't seem like it. Good. Now he could finally give all of his attention to Logan. "Okay, I think we're good," he said. As she got out of the car, she looked up at his house.

"This is yours?"

"Yeah," Anthony said sheepishly.

"Nice," she said. And not inexpensive, she thought. Not for a place this big in a city this expensive.

"I was hoping you'd like it," smiled Anthony. "Especially the inside. I redid the inside myself." Unlike Nicholas, Anthony liked a more modern look when it came to furniture. Clean lines. Sharp angles. Nothing old-fashioned. Except for the craftsmanship that he demanded in every piece of furniture that he had others make for him. It cost him a fortune. But what the hell. Why have money if you are not going to spend it on things you love?

Together they walked in. Just before he shut the door behind them, Timothy Coffee's man drove by the house. Seeing Anthony's car parked in the

driveway, he made a mental note of the house number. Parking two blocks away, he called Coffee.

"I got the address where she is," he said. "It's a big fucking Victorian in the Haight."

"Okay, give it to me," said Coffee, "and I'll figure out who lives there."

"You can do that?"

"You should know by now that I can find out anything about anybody."

"Right, you're ex-CIA. I forgot."

It took all of three minutes before Coffee called him back.

"His name is Anthony Ridgeway," said Coffee. "Let's see, looks like he's an ad guy. What was that address that she first went to again?"

"You mean the condo in Pacific Heights?"

"Yeah."

The guy told him.

Five minutes later, Coffee called back again. "Of the ten units, one guy there, a guy by the name of Nicholas Beckett, he's also in advertising. As everyone else in the building is a fucking investment banker, I think we got 'em. I'm gonna call Meekins. Good job. You're done."

"So, I can go home?"

"You can. For now."

When Meekins saw that the call was coming from Timothy Coffee, he answered immediately.

"And?..."

"She went to see two ad guys."

An Anthony Ridgeway and a Nicholas Beckett. Right?"

'Yeah, right. How'd you know?"

"I read the trades."

"Trades? Whatever. Okay. Well, she's with the one now. I've already researched their phone numbers. You want 'em?"

"Yeah."

Roger Meekins wrote them down and was about to hang up on Coffee when he remembered. "Wait. You said she is with one of them now, right? Which one is it?"

"The Ridgeway guy."

"And which number that you gave me was his? The first or the second?"

"The first."

"Got it. Good job, Timothy, as always. We'll be in touch."

Anthony was proudly showing Logan around his place. She seemed to like his taste. That made him happy. It's not easy making modern furniture work perfectly within the character of a Victorian. But somehow, Anthony had done it. He had just started opening a bottle of wine when he felt his phone vibrate in his pocket. He forgot that he wasn't supposed to answer his phone in case it was a reporter calling.

"Hello," said Anthony, answering his phone.

"Anthony Ridgeway?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

"Roger Meekins."

Anthony paused. Gesturing to Logan, he put his phone on speaker.

“Roger Meekins, you say. The one who has something to do with the Democracy News Network, right? Huh, what can I do for you?”

“I think you got that backwards. What you should be asking is what can I do for you?”

Anthony stayed silent.

“And the answer is that I’m going to give you a chance. A chance to come on my network and explain to the world why you are using a rich bastard’s money to corrupt democracy.”

“What makes you think that I am doing anything like that, Mr Meekins?”

“Because Logan Jamison is standing right next to you. And she works for Warren Holt, who is the rich bastard I was referring to.”

Anthony looked over at his window. The blinds were drawn. No one could be looking in. How could he have possibly known...wait, fuck, the guy in the car.

“The way I look at it, Mr Ridgeway, you can come on my network and explain who you are working for and why. Or...” Meekins stopped talking

“Or?”

“Or, you can let me explain it to the world without any rebuttal from you. And trust me, you don’t want me to do that. I need your answer by end of day tomorrow. You can reach me on the number you just answered.”

“Wait a minute...”

Anthony heard the click as Roger Meekins hung up. Looking over at Logan, he heard her say it before he had a chance to.

“Shit.”

FORTY-SIX

The violence started unexpectedly in Kentucky.

It was another day of lineups at police stations and courthouses. Another day without any money being made available for those volunteering to register their guns. All the news stations on TV and online were telling people not to come in—that the authorities wouldn't have any money to hand out for a while. That it would take time. That Congress needed to approve it first.

Social media was also doing its part. Word was getting out. No money. Not yet. But people were only believing what they wanted to believe. Everyone had heard what Dick Andrews had said. And nobody wanted to miss out.

To say that it didn't go over too well is to say the expected.

"What do you mean you don't have any money?" was the question everyone asked. "We heard Dick Andrews on Cumberland's show. He's the one that said first come, first served. Well, we're first. Serve us."

The police were carefully monitoring the situation. Very politely, they told those in line that they would need to disperse and try again later, maybe in a week. Hopefully, by then, the Republican Party would have gotten its act together and some money would be available.

Unfortunately, the crowd didn't disperse, far from it. In fact, it seemed to only be getting larger as more and more people arrived.

There is a psychology of crowds that gives some people the courage they wouldn't have had if they were alone. It was a few of these, now egged on by others in the rapidly expanding line of people, who started to talk back to the police.

It may have started as friendly banter, but it quickly went south. It doesn't take much to light a spark when the tinder is dry. Anger is a strange and volatile emotion. Sometimes it can be walked off before any harm is done. This wasn't one of those times.

Being angry and being pushed on by others, not to mention others who are armed, is an explosive combination that seems to discourage walking away. No one wants to appear weak, not when they're holding a gun. After all, if you're carrying a gun and get angry, well, why would you be carrying the damn thing if you didn't want to use it?

It was in the using it that all hell broke loose.

First, one cop went down, a bullet in the leg. Seeing him fall, another cop drew his weapon. Probably not a good idea. A bullet hit him in the neck, an inch above his Kevlar vest.

When the shooting started, the crowd took sides—some for and some against the shooting of the two cops. And what should have been a dialogue of words quickly descended into a deluge of bullets.

In the melee, a total of 12 people were killed. Another 24 wounded.

When Dick Andrews saw it unfold on the news, his head dropped into his hands. No, no, no, this would not look good. Even his ever-ready thoughts and prayers press release that he kept in the top drawer of his desk, slightly tattered and torn from overuse, wouldn't get him out of this one.

After all, it was his idea, wasn't it? It was he who introduced the A&A Repayment Plan on Cumberland's show. Now his plan, *his* fucking plan, had 12 casualties associated with it. He had only one chance, and he knew it. He had to pass the buck. And do it as quickly as possible.

The morning after the *AARP Massacre*, the name the press had already assigned to the melee, he had already talked with a few other Senators who

agreed with him that Zack Upchurch was the most reasonable buck catcher out there. Kentucky *was* his state. He was the GOP senator who voted for the gun registration legislation. In other words, he was the one who stabbed any supporter of our God-given Second Amendment in the back.

If anyone should be filleted over this, it should be him.

Dick Andrews picked up his phone and called Upchurch's office. When he asked for Zack, he was told that he wasn't available. He asked him to call him back immediately.

"Afraid immediately won't be possible, sir," UpChurch's aide replied.

"Not possible? Why?" asked Andrews.

"Well, the reason is that he's not even in the country. Away on vacation with the whole family. For two weeks. Maybe a month. Said he wasn't to be disturbed. For any reason."

"A month? What the...when, when did this come up?" stammered Andrews.

"All happened very suddenly, sir," replied the aide. "Decided on the trip, what, like a few days ago."

There was a pause on Andrew's end of the line.

"Will there be anything else, sir?" the aide asked.

"And you said that he decided on the trip just a few days ago? Just like that? Out of the blue?"

"Well, sir...apparently..."

But the aide didn't get a chance to finish as he heard Andrews yell "God damn him," as he hung up. Which is too bad. Because it meant that Dick Andrews never heard the aide tell him that Zack UpChurch planned his trip right about the time he heard Andrews utter the words 'first come, first served'.

FORTY-SEVEN

“You want me to do what?”

Logan held up her hand, indicating to Nicholas and Anthony to let her answer the question that Warren Holt just asked. It was eleven in the morning, and the three of them were in Anthony’s living room in front of a large monitor, on a Zoom call with Warren Holt in Seattle.

“Either we control the narrative...or they will, Warren,” she replied. “And by us dictating next steps, it will give us the chance to buy some time.”

“Explain that part again, will you, please?” Warren was pissed off. Logan had seen the signs before. She nodded towards Nicholas to let him know that he should take it from here. It didn’t look like Nicholas wanted to, but he did.

“Well, Warren, the way we look at it, if we tell Meekins that *you’re* willing to go on Cumberland’s show for a one-on-one, he’s going to be so excited about it that he will probably let us pick the date.”

“And the reason he won’t reveal that I’m the money behind The Betterment Alliance before that date is?”

“There’s no guarantee. No, none whatsoever. But we don’t think he will. We think he will want to save the reveal so that he can get the largest viewing audience that he can.”

Warren said nothing, but they could see from his expression that he was playing the options around in his head. Finally, he asked, “Logan, where are you on this?”

Looking at Anthony, she saw that he was smiling at her. She had noticed that he seemed to be doing that a lot lately. It flustered her as she still hadn’t figured out why she liked it so much when he did it. Turning her attention back to the screen, she answered. “I think it’s the right thing to do, Warren. If

it's you and Cumberland, one-on-one, you'll get to express why you started the Alliance. As well as why it's so important. Especially at this time. You've always said that if people understood that hope is dying, they will then understand why you're doing what you're doing."

Warren was still shaking his head. "I don't know. Cumberland's a tricky bastard. He's going to do everything he can to try and malign me?"

Logan could only shrug her shoulders. She knew that this was exactly what Cumberland would do. "Yes, yes, he will. And that's the kind of shit he's good at. But we're asking for it to be just the two of you. And in those circumstances, I mean, when I've seen you in those situations in the past, most of the time you come out the winner."

"And don't forget, you'll get the full hour," chimed in Nicholas.

"Yeah, you mentioned that. That you'd demand I'm the only guest for the full hour. And that there would be no commercial breaks. Really? You really think Meekins is going to go for that?"

"He will if we pay for the commercial time that he's giving up," said Nicholas. "To Meekins, it's all about the money."

"And you think viewership will be huge."

"If he keeps the reveal of you a secret, yep."

"But isn't that kind of money the whole point, Warren?" added Logan. "To show that today, no matter who you are, whether you're a politician, a network executive, I mean, good God, even the public is now shooting each other over one hundred dollars; everything and to everyone today, it's all about the money."

Anthony raised his hand because he wanted to add something. Logan found it cute that he thought you had to raise your hand on a Zoom call. He did have a certain innocent charm to him, she had to admit.

Nicholas also noticed. He had forgotten that this was the first time Anthony had actually had a face-to-face with Warren Holt. “Anthony, it seems as if you want to say something?” he said with a smile.

“Yeah. If it’s alright, I mean...”

Logan nodded to Anthony, who smiled and continued.

“By offering you up, Mr Holt, to Meekins, it will give us the chance to pick the date of the reveal. This will buy us the time we need to promote the program in our own way, to influence people as to what they are going to see before they see it.”

For the first time, Warren Holt almost smiled. He knew where Anthony was going. “In other words, to create the perception that helps to alter the reality,” he said.

“Not to alter,” said Anthony, “but to, I don’t know, I think the better way to put it is to affect the reality. It’s not unlike setting a table before hosting a dinner party. The nicer the table setting, the better most people think the food actually tastes.”

Logan found herself smiling. Anthony had made her a delicious pasta the night before. He was meticulous with the table setting. She liked that. As he was with the wine he had chosen. She liked that even more.

“And you will set this so-called table through advertising?”

“That’s what we were thinking, yeah.”

“And as the main course,” Warren continued, “what do you see me being? Prime rib or hamburger?”

“Hopefully, the former,” smiled Nicholas.

Warren was thinking, blankly looking down at his fingers as he tapped them on the table in front of him. Logan had seen this before. She knew that this was what happened right before he made a decision. It was one of the

characteristics that she admired about him—that he never took long to make up his mind. He seemed to weigh the pros and cons faster than most. That said, her glance over at Nicholas and Anthony told them that she was not optimistic about where he would come out on this.

“And you want me to pay for all the commercial time, right? So that there are no interruptions. And you just said that it won’t be inexpensive.”

“Yes, yes I did,” responded Nicholas. “Not inexpensive at all. But effective. And for that reason, we think it is well worth the cost.”

“You’re rather free with my money, Nicholas.”

Without hesitating, Nicholas shot back. “You gave me a budget. I’m still within it.”

Logan cringed. She wasn’t used to seeing people talk back to Warren. To her surprise, he smiled.

“Touché. And when do you need to let Meekins know?” asked Warren. Logan crossed her fingers as she answered. “We have until six this evening.”

“Six? Tonight? Why am I not surprised? Okay, let me ask, Plan B? What would that be?”

Nicholas looked at Anthony, who slowly shrugged his shoulders. Now it was Logan’s turn to look down at her hands. Nicholas did have that other idea of trying to sell Holt as a conscientious billionaire. At least he considered it until Meekins called them yesterday. That put the kibosh on them doing anything other than what they were now proposing.

“Nicholas did have an idea yesterday that he shared with us, but...”

“It wasn’t as good as this one,” jumped in Nicholas, cutting Logan off before she could continue. He didn’t want Holt to think that they were forced into going in a weaker direction. “Not even close to this good. I think this is our best alternative.”

“I see,” said Warren. He looked at his watch and sighed before adding.
“Call Meekins. Set up the interview for a month from now.”

Logan looked up. The surprise on her face was evident.

“I assume that will give you sufficient enough time to...how did you put it? Set the table?”

“If that’s what we got...,” said Nicholas, “then that’s what will work.”

FORTY-EIGHT

Congress had, somewhat surprisingly, called for an immediate emergency session to discuss a new legislative proposal that would make money immediately available for gun registration. It was surprising because the killing of only 12 people does not usually get that kind of rapid response from Congress.

Say an 18-year old walks into a classroom and kills a dozen or so children with an AR15. Not at all an unusual event in the U.S. these days. When that happens, all one gets in that instance are thoughts and prayers. After all, no *direct* link to can be made to that 18-year-old killer and either party in Congress. Even though Congress's lack of action did somehow allow that 18-year-old to buy a weapon of mass destruction.

If the line isn't direct, no need to correct.

But this was a bit different. This time the 12 dead did offer a direct line that was as straight as an arrow.

And it was an arrow that was pointing right at Dick Andrews, the head of the Republican Party. He's the one who went on national TV and promised the money that wasn't there. People died because the money wasn't there. The finger of blame was being pointed directly at the GOP. And that meant only one thing. Votes could be lost. And since votes, unlike lives, are the most valuable commodity to a Senator (after, of course, money), the emergency session was quickly agreed to.

The GOP has always been, historically, against big government interference. Especially big government handouts. So it was a surprise to both sides how quickly an agreement was reached.

Apparently, cash handouts that kept an Armed and Angry crowd from acting in an armed and angry way against them was seen as a good thing by Republican Senators. What was left unsaid was that the Republicans knew that most guns, including most of the unregistered guns, were in the hands of Republican voters. Based on the numbers, a Republican was more than twice as likely to own a gun as a Democrat. So if these handouts were going to go to anyone, they would be going mostly to those who voted GOP. This was seen as a good thing come next election to any Republicans currently in office.

The voting pool was one thing every politician kept an eye on. And what was slowly dawning on them regarding the size of that pool, even though they would never say so in public, was that if gun owners started shooting other gun owners, that would mean a lot of potential Republican voters would be dead come the next election.

Surprisingly, Republican Senators did actually know that a dead voter can't vote, even if they did claim that it happened all the time on the Democrat's side.

Something similar happened during the pandemic. Over one million people died in the U.S. alone. The incidence of death was much higher among the unvaccinated than it was among the vaccinated. And as everyone knew, the unvaccinated were mostly Republicans.

That didn't bode too well for the GOP side when the midterms came around. In key battleground states, states that the GOP would normally cruise to victory in, the vote went to the Democrats. Not by a lot. Sometimes, only by a whisker. But it had the GOP wondering. Could it be attributed to the lack of turnout on the GOP side because so many of the unvaccinated had died?

We're literally killing ourselves with our beliefs, was the GOP lament. The margins of victory are slim as it is. To continue killing off our own voters is

madness. We need to stop fooling around. We need to find the money to pay the damn registration fee already.

And just like that, the emergency session came to an agreement almost before it had even started.

FORTY-NINE

After talking with Warren Holt, the three of them had gone out to a long lunch and then over to Nicholas' place. What they were actually' doing was procrastinating, making sure that they knew exactly what they wanted to tell Roger Meekins before making the call. But it was now half past five in the afternoon. Time was up. Anthony found Meekins number under recent calls on his phone and activated it. When the phone started ringing, he put it on speaker and handed it to Nicholas.

"And here I was starting to think that I might not hear from you, Anthony," Meekins said, answering his phone. "But then I thought, no, that would be bad for them, very bad indeed. They'll call. And now, here you are."

"Yes, here we are," said Nicholas.

Hearing a new voice, Meekins smiled to himself.

"Ah, this must be the mysterious Mr Beckett, I assume. And may I also assume that when you say *we* you are including Mr Ridgeway and the lovely Ms Jamison?"

Logan chimed in, "Yeah, we're all here, Meekins," before turning to Anthony and mouthing the words 'fucking bastard.'

"Excellent. So then am I also to assume that because of this call you are willing to come on?"

"Not exactly," said Nicholas.

There was a pause on Meekins' end of the line. That wasn't the answer he was expecting to hear. "H'mph," he finally said. "I must say, I'm surprised to hear that. As I mentioned to Mr Ridgeway, if you leave it to me to expose the truth behind the Betterment Alliance, you are not going to like it. No, you are not going to like it one bit."

“If I may finish, Meekins...”

Once again, there was a pause on Meekins’ end of the line. He wasn’t used to be talked to in this way. But when he responded, he sounded calm. “By all means, please. So sorry to interrupt.”

“It will not be us that will be showing up on your program. It will be Warren Holt.”

The pause this time was longer and deeper. Finally, Meekins came back on. As much as he tried to hide it, the glee in his voice was obvious. “I must say, even better. Yes indeed, even better. But if it is Warren Holt that will grace us with his presence, then I am rather sure that you are going to say that it comes with some caveats.”

“You got that right,” Logan said, she thought softly, but Meekins heard her. As did Anthony who looked at her and smiled. He did like the girl’s feistiness.

“Ha, as I thought. So perhaps you would like to explain those caveats to me,” said Meekins.

“Sure,” said Nicholas. “For starters, he’ll only appear on Brandon Cumberland’s show.”

“Not a problem,” said Meekins, not a problem at all. In fact, I was thinking that Brandon’s show would be the best for this anyways.”

Nicholas continued. “When I say appear, I mean appear in person. To be there, on set, with Cumberland.”

“On set? H’mph, interesting. As you know, the majority of our interviews are conducted over Zoom these days. I don’t think Brandon’s has had a live guest for...”

“It’s either that or nothing, Meekins. Take it or leave it.”

"I see. Okay then. We can make that work. Yes, I've been meaning to go back to more live guests anyway. I'll just need to talk to Brandon, but I am sure that he will be all for it."

"Good. Which brings us to caveat number two. Mr Holt will be the only guest. And he will be the only guest for the full hour."

"Ha," said Meekins. "You know, of all the things I would expect that you'd ask for, I truly wasn't expecting that one. A full hour, Holt versus Cumberland. In person yet. That would be different. Yes, yes, it would be different. But you know, it could also be interesting. Unusual, but quite interesting. Yes. I like it. Consider it done."

"Good."

"Now is there anything else? Perhaps a caveat number three? Does Mr Holt like a certain type of Danish, or perhaps whisky? You'd be surprised how many guests, if they're on set, like a little whisky mixed in with their coffee."

"Are you quite done?" asked Nicholas.

"Yes, sorry, quite." He chuckled softly. Meekins was enjoying himself. "By all means, please continue, Nicholas."

"There is another stipulation. And it's that there will be no commercial breaks for the entire hour."

This time, Meekins' laugh wasn't one of conviviality, but rather, of disbelief.

"Now, now, Mr Beckett, you do realize I'm in the business of making money. And the way I make my money is through advertising."

"Yes, being in the advertising business ourselves, we realize that. Which is why we are willing to pay you for every commercial break that you would have sold that hour. We just don't want any commercials to run and interrupt the flow of the program."

Meekins' laugh this time was one of incredulousness. "I don't think you realize the type of money I could get per spot for this type of show. What you are talking about will cost you in the millions."

"We figure it's going to be even more than that. And why's that? Because we're not just going to pay you for whatever you would have got per commercial, we promise that we will double that figure."

"Double?"

"That's what I said.."

"Double? Ha! And I get to say what the commercial costs would be?"

"You do."

"And you'll *double* it? Just to make sure the program isn't interrupted?"

"Correct."

Again, a pause on Meekins' end of the line. Finally he responded. "Okay then," said Meekins. "I don't know if I can trust you Mr Beckett, but if I can, then you have a deal."

"Not quite," continued Nicholas. Pausing, he looked over at Logan. Before Warren got off the Zoom call that morning, he had one more stipulation that he wanted to add in. It seemed to be a strange one to both Anthony and Nicholas. Even Logan looked puzzled. But according to Warren, it was either that or no deal. And they certainly wanted the deal.

"So there is even one more stipulation?" asked Meekins. "You know I usually only accept three." Again, the soft chuckle.

Nicholas tried to block out the glee he heard in Meekins' voice. He didn't like how much Meekins seemed to be enjoying this. "The last stipulation is that the show has to run for the complete hour. Brandon can't cut it short, nor can you. You have to run the feed for the complete 60 minutes. No breaks. No cut-aways."

“Or?”

“Or, we don’t pay for *any* of the commercial time.”

“Interesting. Interesting. Yes, quite interesting,” said Meekins. As he paused, Nicholas looked over at Logan. Maybe they had pushed him too far with this last request.

“And that’s why you’re doubling the cost of the commercial time.”

Nicholas didn’t respond, waiting.

“So that it would be so valuable to me that I wouldn’t dare cut away or cut it short.”

Nicholas looked anxiously at Anthony and Logan, but all three stayed quiet.

“Interesting, that it is, Mr Beckett, I must say. Yes, double or nothing is very, very interesting. Okay...so, do you have a date?”

Logan looked at Anthony who was smiling. She wasn’t sure that it was relief or disbelief that she was seeing.

“We do,” answered Nicholas. “One month from today. We’d like it to be a Wednesday night.”

“Done. I assume you will be sending me a contract for me to sign? And that contract had better stipulate very clearly that you will pay double the commercial cost. The commercial cost that I determined.”

Nicholas looked over at Logan who nodded. She would be the one writing the contract.

“It will. And we’ll get it to you by...” he paused, again looking at Logan who mouthed ‘end of week’ ... “by the end of the week.

“Excellent. And may I say, Mr Beckett, and I do mean this sincerely. It has been a real pleasure.”

Nicholas looked at Anthony as both he and Logan and rolled their eyes. They all knew that Meekins had no idea what pleasure was—unless it came in the form of cash.

“And, oh,” Meekins continued. “As I assume that Ms Jamison will be on set when we do the interview, do tell the lovely Logan that I so look forward to seeing her.”

“That fucking asshole,” she whispered under her breath. Angrily, she reached out to grab the phone out of Nicholas’ hand, but he shook his head.

“He’s gone,” he said. “Bastard’s hung up.”

FIFTY

How it happened, no one knows. But somehow word got out that the Armed and Angry letter originated at Ellie's diner.

Ellie had tried to reach Jessie and Elijah early that morning on their phones, warning them not to come in for breakfast. Not just because she had no place to seat them, but because all the seats in the diner were taken up by the press.

As it was, neither Jessie or Elijah got the message in time.

Jessie arrived first, and when he walked in, he was immediately swarmed by the media types. They were so busy pounding him with questions that they almost missed Elijah when he entered the diner five minutes later.

When Ellie saw Elijah at the door, she tried to warn him by waving him away. But a reporter saw her do it and turning to see Elijah standing in the doorway, figured that he must be important. Immediately he went over and started peppering him with questions. And like bees following their queen, all the reporters turned from Jessie to Elijah.

The questions were coming fast and furious.

Why did you write it?

What did you mean when you signed it 'angry'?

Is it a threat against the government?

Are you a terrorist?

Are you being paid by the Democrats?

Elijah's eyes were as wide as a teenage boy seeing his first naked picture online. He stuttered and stammered, looking to Ellie for help.

Grabbing a cup of coffee, she started working her way through the reporters to where Elijah was standing.

“Make room, make room,” she hollered as she pushed her way through the throng. “This coffee is hot as hell. Don’t want to spill it on any of you. By accident or...on purpose.”

Hearing this and seeing the look in her eyes, the reporters opened up a lane for her to walk through. When she got to Elijah, she handed him the cup of coffee. “Here, think you’re going to need this.”

She could see that Elijah was shaking. “What do I do, Ellie? I mean, what the fuck do I do?”

“Be honest and speak from the heart. And remember, you did nothing wrong.” She pinched him on the bum to loosen him up as she turned to work her way back through the reporters. “C’mon, make room,” she shouted. “Lady coming through.”

Elijah slowly took a sip of the coffee. Ellie’s interruption, well, maybe it was the pinch on the bottom that helped, but he had calmed down. “Okay, okay,” he finally got out. “One at a time.”

“Are you a terrorist?” was the first question asked.

“No, I’m an electrician.”

That got a laugh from some of the reporters.

Then another question. “Was your letter a call to violence?”

Elijah slowly shook his head. “No,” he smiled. “It was just a statement of fact. Here in Kentucky, we are armed. Well, at least most of us are. And why not, I mean, most of us here are Republicans.”

That got another laugh. And the laughing calmed Elijah down even more.

“As for angry, yes, I think it’s fair to say that we are that, too. But then, a lot of people in this country are angry. We’re angry that the money all seems to be going to the politicians and we figure that they already have more than they

know what to do with. It just made sense to us that some of that money should be coming to those who voted those politicians in. What I'm talking about are hard, kind, simple, working folks who sure could use some cash."

"You were asking for \$3,000 a gun. Are you satisfied with \$100?"

"I'm satisfied that the politicians, especially the ones that we voted in, are finally willing to share some of their riches. Granted, one hundred is a far cry from three thousand. But it also surely beats the hell out of a donkey kicking you in the ass."

More laughter from the reporters.

Jessie had worked his way over to Ellie who had found her way back behind the counter. She handed him the cup of coffee that she had just poured.

"Kid's doing pretty good," said Ellie, nodding at Elijah proudly.

"Yeah, who the fuck knew?" smiled Jessie. He looked around at the full diner. "And I have to say, by the looks of things, you're not doing too poorly yourself."

Ellie smiled. "Best day in three years," she said. "Hell, ten years. You know what I think?"

Jessie shook his head no.

"I think that if this is the result, we need to keep the kid writing those damn letters."

FIFTY-ONE

He had always found this to be his best place to think. For some, it's a long walk, a deserted cabin, or a remote beach. Warren Holt had tried all of these. But to him, nothing worked as well as flying at 40,000 feet in your own jet.

His Gulf Stream 650 was capable of going over 600 miles per hour. Which meant flights like this one, from Seattle to London for an investor's conference, would clock in at around 11 hours. All prime thinking time.

He had hesitated in agreeing to the in-person, hour-long interview with Cumberland. He didn't really want to do the interview, knowing it would be a shit show. But he trusted Nicholas and Logan. If they said that it was time to come out of hiding, then they were probably right. That said, he knew that Cumberland was a slippery interviewer. And whatever Warren said on the show to defend his position would be twisted around and met with pushback.

He had an idea where the attacks would come from. They would start with him being a man of means, a successful capitalist, a rich bastard. A man, who could, because of his wealth, have anything he wanted. Anything that is, except a conscience. That was the line of attack usually taken against those who do suddenly develop a sense of empathy *after* they make their money ravaging the world, using forced labor from third-world countries, or polluting the planet.

Oh yeah, their critics say, *now* you develop a conscience. *Now that you have made your billions, you go woke.*

It was difficult to counter those points as many of the facts behind them were true. Making money, at least making the kind of money that he did, required turning a blind eye to some things that he knew were wrong. That's

just the way the world works. So instead of denying it—him, and others like him—they found a way to rationalize that this was just the way things were done. That even if they didn't pay the foreign workers they employed a Western hourly wage, far from it actually, what they did pay them was much better than what they could get doing anything else in their country.

Rationalization. Such a comforting safety net for the rich. It allowed them to live without feeling the pain of the truth. Was it living a lie? Perhaps. But he had found that a comfortable lie, over time, becomes the same as the truth. At least, their truth.

It's such an interesting word, truth, isn't it, Warren thought to himself as he looked out on the clouds floating so peacefully below his plane. Sometimes he felt like just opening the plane door and jumping out. The clouds would catch him, right? Isn't that what they were there for?

He remembered a quote he once memorized from a Japanese novel about the warrior Miyamoto Musashi. *"Truth is not what you want it to be, it is what it is. And you must bend to its power or live a lie."*

It was the lie that everyone was living that Warren wanted to correct.

It used to mean one thing, truth. Back before truth became subjective. Back before there weren't two truths to every issue based on different perspectives. Back when there was just one absolute truth. The one based on facts that could be proved. The one that relied on reality. But these days, the truth was that even facts were open to debate. Multiple truths, multiple facts, multiple realities, all depending on which social media stream one was following.

He knew that when lies start to become accepted as truth that's the time that hope started to die. Unfortunately, it had been going on for years already. The lack of trust in the truth had led to a collapse of trust in the institutions

that helped any country run and maintain its stability. Trust, strong institutions, moral integrity, shared truths—that was the mortar that kept democracies together. Slowly, it was all eroding. The truth that was needed to maintain a sane and civil society was no more. Democracy, a way of governing that was built on shared truths, was being chipped away at by falsehoods. Social media only added to the confusion as it was a network of shared lies, not truths. And once we, as a society, start sharing lies, we create the platform that allows autocracy to quietly slip in.

Unnoticed at first. And then, once it has its foothold, proudly announcing itself.

Unfortunately, these platforms were only becoming more solid over time.

Which is why he was stepping in now, wasn't it? Before it was truly too late. Wasn't that the only reason that he started the Betterment Alliance? Well?

He, of course, had read about the 12 killings in Kentucky and he knew where the blame would go. If it weren't for the Betterment Alliance buying GOP votes to change the legislation, those 12 would still be alive today. A spacious argument, obviously, but that wouldn't stop Cumberland from making it. And the fact was that if he didn't pay to have the legislation changed, those 12 *would* still be alive. Just like if the NRA and others didn't pay to *not* have guns laws changed, so many other kids whose lives had been taken would still be walking around.

Not an argument that would go over well on Cumberland's show.

Even so, he knew he would need to have a ready response when the accusation flew that he was at fault. He thought he already knew what Cumberland's point of view would be, where he would be coming from, how

he would try and win his arguments. And Warren would need to be ready to parry those types of attacks.

The lack of commercial breaks would help. It meant Cumberland couldn't cut to a break if the going got tough. Nicholas was smart to ask for that. As he was to demand that the program had to run for the full hour, that neither Meekins nor Cumberland could cut it short. Nicholas explained how this would also stop Cumberland from running if he felt he were losing.

The more Warren thought about it, the more he realized how this could benefit him more than Cumberland. It was why he had called Nicholas right back after that morning Zoom call, telling him to tell Meekins that he would pay double for whatever the commercial time would cost. At first, Nicholas didn't understand why. And then it clicked for him as it did years ago for Warren—the grifter's protocol at work. Make the pay-out so large that the grifter is blind to the gift. Holt knew that Meekins would have no choice but to accept all the terms they were asking for if he doubled the rate.

After all, once a grifter, always a grifter.

At least that's what he was hoping.

Hope.

Oh, yes, that's how this all started wasn't it? His attempt to bring hope back into the world. Hope that was unfairly mischaracterized as hate on Meekins' Democratic News Network and then reinforced and blown way out of proportion on the social media platforms.

From hope to hate. Somehow doing good, or at least what he thought was doing good, had become doing bad. How in the hell did that happen? How does he defend his position on that?

The bigger question though, the one he still knew he needed a better answer for was why, in fact, was he doing this? Spending his money, a shitload

of his money, to try and bring hope into the world. Out of the goodness of his heart? Really? People weren't going to buy that. He had thought about it a lot. Sure, the argument he used was that if the world lost hope and fell into chaos, then he and his companies would lose money. And there *was* truth in that. But what was true for him was also true for other businesses out there. And where were they? Why weren't the owners of any of those businesses speaking out, standing up, saying what the fuck?

He knew that the answer for many was that their focus was to make as much money as they possibly could before all hell broke loose and then take cover in their bunkers of safety, their bolthole estates in New Zealand or Montana that all their billions could buy them. The way they looked at it, it was all about protecting themselves and their families once the chaos ensued. Which they all knew was inevitable.

He knew this was the way they thought because it was the way that he had thought, as well, for the longest time.

What changed, he wondered to himself. What made him change his thinking to 'we' from 'me'? To the whole world from his world?

"Fucking ego," he found himself saying, out loud, causing him to look around the plane to see if anyone else had heard him. But, of course, the plane was empty. Just like his plane always was. Empty.

Money can buy you a lot of things, just not the things you cherish the most. Like true friendship. Or, love.

But, ego. Yes, money can be used to assuage an ego. And when your ego was as big as Warren Holt's, a lot of money was needed. Landing on the moon. Space stations on Mars. Building alternative universes. Fuck that. But saving the world? Yes. When it comes to ego-building, saving the world is pretty damn hard to top.

There was a break in the clouds revealing the ocean lying far below. He was somewhere over the Atlantic. The map on the monitor in front of him was showing that they had around three hours to go before landing.

Good, he thought. That would give him three more hours to think. He was starting to get afraid that it might not be long enough for him to come up with all of the answers that he knew he would need.

FIFTY-TWO

The air date they had agreed to with Meekins was April 30th, a Wednesday. They knew that up to the airdate, Meekins would not only be promoting the show on his network but promoting it heavily. The more eyeballs, the more money in advertising dollars he could charge. Of course, he wouldn't mention Warren Holt's name in the promotional pieces. No, that would need to remain a mystery to build up the intrigue. The interest. The viewership numbers. The advertising dollars.

Nicholas and Anthony had a different agenda. Not so much to reveal Warren before the program, but to interest the non-DNN viewer enough to get them to watch as well. Which meant promoting the program on every network except DNN.

Of course, that meant coming up with a commercial to promote the show.

At first they considered changing the format, doing a commercial that was something other than all-type. But they couldn't ignore the fact that the format that they were using seemed to work. And, interestingly enough, the all type look was now being associated with the Betterment Alliance. It had become part of their identity. What some might call their brand.

Sticking with it made the most sense.

The question they were fighting with, and what they were trying to figure out now, was what to say in the commercial.

Logan was working right alongside them. She had thought about flying back to Seattle, but she was finding Anthony's place quite pleasant. As she was finding Anthony himself. Her sixth night there, she had awoken at three in the morning. It was quiet in the house. Anthony's bedroom was just down the hall.

His door was shut. Tiptoeing down the hall to his door, she must have stood outside it for ten minutes, wondering. Should she or shouldn't she go in? Anthony was interested; that was obvious from the way she caught him looking at her. They were both adults. Both unattached at the moment. Just say that you were wondering where the spare blankets were or something innocent like that. Let Anthony make the first move.

She found herself feeling her breast through the oversized men's shirt that Anthony had given her to wear to bed. Yes, going in would feel awfully nice, she thought. But...

It is always the buts, isn't it? The moment's hesitation. The doubts. The I should n'ts versus the why the hell nots?

But...

She tiptoed back down the hall and quickly crawled back into her bed. Again, one hand found her breast. The other went lower. Damn, she thought. Damn, damn, damn.

When the two of them arrived at Nicholas' the next day, he greeted them excitedly. "I think I might have something."

He handed Anthony a sheet of paper with some copy running down from top to bottom.

"What's this?" asked Anthony.

"I'm hoping the next commercial," replied Nicholas. "Just read the damn thing, see what you think."

Anthony started to smile as he read. Logan, being more left-brain than right, looked more puzzled as she read next to him. "This is supposed to somehow work?" she asked.

Anthony put his arm around her. "With any piece of communication, it's what's not said, what's between the lines, the part the viewer fills in, that's where the real communication lies."

She looked at Anthony. Was he trying to say that it was just like in a relationship? That it's what's not said that is the most important? Where the real communication lies. Like the fact that he had his arm over her shoulders right now?

"What Nicholas has done here has raised a question," continued Anthony. "A question the viewer needs to answer. Basically, what this does is let the viewer persuade himself or herself that yes, this would be worthwhile to watch. You don't persuade people with advertising. At least not with good advertising. The best advertising is when you let someone persuade themselves, that's the most impactful type of advertising you can do."

"And this will do that?" she asked, still not certain.

Nicholas shrugged his shoulders. "There was a great adman from right here in San Francisco who once said, 'When baiting a trap with cheese, always leave room for the mouse.' This leaves room for the viewer to take the bait. But will it work? The truth is that you never really..."

But Anthony interrupted him. "I know. It's damn good, Nicholas. Damn good. I think we need to go buy some airtime."

FIFTY-THREE

It took only two weeks before Dick Andrews could declare the Armed and Angry payout plan a success. In that short period of time, over one million people had come forward to register their guns and collect the payout, now that there was the money available to pay out. No more killings had occurred while people waited in line.

Even the Democrats couldn't complain about what had become an obvious win for the GOP. After all, registering guns is what the Democrats had always been clamoring for. Now that they had it, they couldn't condemn it, could they?

Which is why Dick Andrews should have been in a celebratory mood. That he wasn't was because everyone in government was too busy wondering what was next. It was obvious that the Betterment Alliance wasn't done. If it could influence legislation on climate and guns, what would it next be trying to change legislation on? And if this is how government was going to be run, the will of the people being enacted thanks to the highest bidder, then that was not going to go well for the GOP.

Why was that? Only because most of the things that the majority of Americans wanted to see passed were being filibustered by only one party. Dick Andrew's party. In other words, it would be painting them into a corner as the bad guys.

In the past, the GOP was able to hide it, smoke-screen their way through any objections to what they were doing or how they were doing it. Telling their version of the truth, letting whoever listened to them draw their own inferences as to what was real. He knew Republican voters would believe in what the GOP said only because it fit their narrative.

Everyone knew that today the truth was gussied up, inflated, or dumbed down to serve a higher purpose, a higher truth—the preconceptions of the audience.

This worked, until...

Until the Betterment Alliance, in their damn black and white simplicity of words on the screen, called them out. And not just called them out, but had their own damn people, the Zach Upchurchs of the world, stand up and in broad daylight, stand up and fucking say, ‘Yep, we’re hypocrites.’

It wouldn’t have been as bad if it were just once. Once, they could have rationalized it off as a fluke. But twice. God damn that UpChurch, twice, made it a pattern. And that made it real. If it happened a third time, well, Dick Andrews didn’t even want to think about that. Already, there were rumors that people were whispering that he should step down. That he had lost control.

Lost control? Jesus! How do you fight \$120 million? How do you fight greed—the strongest drive in man, even stronger than sex—according to those who know.

You don’t. Except with more money from his side. But that would make it an auction, wouldn’t it? Auctioning off legislation to the highest bidder. It was fine when it all happened in the dark, under the table, privately. Behind closed doors, like it normally did. Not in public and on national TV like this Betterment Alliance made it.

Now, even the quiet ones, the ones who so lavishly funded his GOP cohorts to get what they wanted, were pulling back, becoming more cautious. All of a sudden, they were afraid of being exposed for gaming the system. They didn’t mind working under cover, in the shadows, but in the open? No, that wasn’t something they wanted. And if they pulled back, my god, politicians might actually start voting their conscience.

Can't have that.

The only good thing was that the person behind the Alliance would now be brought out into the open, made public, disgraced. Meekins had done his job and ferreted them out.

Finally.

Because, as far as Andrews was concerned, their exposure couldn't happen soon enough.

FIFTY-FOUR

The commercial ran twice on every prominent broadcast and cable channel except the Democracy News Network. The first time was two weeks before the confrontation was to occur. The second time was one week prior.

Two times was more than enough, as the hoopla the commercial created did the rest of the promoting for them. Word of mouth is not only the least expensive, but also the most effective type of advertising one can do. And once the commercial ran, it was the only thing everyone was talking about on social media.

Why? Well, that was the question the commercial itself asked.

***On April 30th, the Founder of
The Betterment Alliance will sit down
for a 1-hour discussion with Brandon Cumberland
on the Democracy News Network.
There will be no commercial interruptions
for the entire hour.
There will be no questions off the table from Mr Cumberland.***

Why?

***Because that's the question everyone should
be asking, isn't it?***

Why...

...is the Betterment Alliance doing what it is doing?

Why...

...is hope important?

Yes. Why?

Not who...
...is the founder?
Not who...
...do they think they are, buying legislation?
Not who...
...asked them to step in?
But why?
One hour.
From who. To why.
To why not?

The Betterment Alliance.
It Can Be Done.

FIFTY-FIVE

Spring had finally come to New York.

Looking down on the streets of New York through his top-floor tower window, Roger Meekins couldn't be happier. Not surprisingly, it had nothing to do with the weather. He wasn't one to give a flying fuck about the weather.

The promoting that he had done for the big showdown coming between Cumberland and Holt seemed to have worked. Now that the air date was only two days away, he had no doubts that this would be the biggest money maker any news program had ever achieved. Especially since Holt's team said they would double whatever he tells them he would have gotten from running advertising.

What he hadn't done yet was mention to Cumberland *all* the restrictions that Nicholas and Anthony had asked for. In person rather than over Zoom and no commercial breaks, those were the things he did mention. Had to. Protocol more or less. What he didn't bring up is that Brandon would not be allowed to cut the program short, it had to be the full hour, or DNN wouldn't be paid.

After all, Cumberland already wasn't too happy about not having any commercial breaks for the entire hour. And he was not happy about the fact that Warren Holt would be in the studio with him. Interviewing over Zoom always gave the host the chance to control the conversation. There was no chance that the guest could intimidate the host, being right there on set across from him, physically within touching distance. As for the lack of commercial breaks, well, everyone in the business knew that the breaks gave the host the chance to change the topic when they came back from a commercial. It broke up the flow just enough so that if the person they were interviewing was on a

roll, it would knock them off their game. A commercial break served the same purpose as being saved by the bell in boxing.

This time, Cumberland would be without those weapons at his disposal. And the fact was, it worried him. He wouldn't admit that to Meekins—hell, with the amount of money Meekins was making on this one hour, the only thing he wanted to tell Meekins was that more than a little bit of that money should be coming his way. Sure, he got paid an extravagant salary—he knew that. But the big dogs got paid the big bucks. With eyeballs comes cash. And if you were bringing in the eyeballs, some of that cash should be yours. After all, he wasn't spinning the lies he was spinning for nothing, was he?

And the fact was, Cumberland never even questioned the ethics of what he was doing or the way that he was doing it. To him, ethics were something poor people believed in. The world wasn't an ethical place except for in the occasional church on an occasional Sunday. But Monday through Friday night, prime time TV...hell, ethics weren't what most people were overly concerned about. It wasn't why anyone tuned in. Besides, he never really outright lied, did he? No. He implied. He inferred. But he asked his questions in such a way that his inference could only be interpreted in the way that he wanted it to be. And then, day by day, he would amplify what he was inferring without ever crossing the line to actually lying. In his opinion, that was showing respect. At least to his audience, if not to the truth. The truth had long ago lost any respect it once may have had when it came to cable news.

Besides, cable news had become more of a variety show than a news program. Everyone knew that. Just like Cumberland knew that he was more of a game show host than a news anchor. His job was to play it broad and big. He had a role and an agenda to push. So he made inferences. Implications. Pushed innuendo. As someone once said, the role of cable news was now to confuse

the gullible and manipulate the unwary. Which Cumberland knew he was very good at. Never outright lying, but lying just the same. DNN rationalized what they did by using the *whataboutism* argument—to say that they were no different than any other new outlet. That this argument wasn't valid was beside the point. They knew that people didn't question lies anymore. Everyone was into confirmation bias. Viewers just took the side that agreed with theirs and claimed that their side was the truth. So, to a dedicated DNN watcher, their tagline—*The Truth. Truthfully Told*—was the most truthful tagline out there.

Meekins had been noticing some pushback from others at DNN that perhaps they had started going too far with their non-lie lies. Not a chance, he thought. "What the hell is too far?" he would growl back at them. "Have you ever watched professional wrestling?" he'd asked. "Ever see the ratings for that? Through the fucking roof. Do people know it's fake? You're goddam right they do. Do they watch anyway? You're goddam right they do. Why? If they know it's fake? Because it's fucking entertaining. You watch Cumberland. You watch some of our other primetime hosts. Is that not entertaining? You're goddam right it is. We are in the entertainment—not news—business. Get that through your fucking thick skulls. And don't you ever, ever talk to me again about anything that I do as being too fucking far."

He was back at the window looking out once more at the beautiful spring morning. Yeah, that was a good speech, he thought, chuckling to himself. That one got his staff's attention. And now, he was about to get the attention of the entire country for one hour of prime-time TV. He could almost smell the money. Forget fucking roses.

Yes, he thought, smiling out the window. It was one beautiful, goddam fucking morning, wasn't it?

FIFTY-SIX

It's funny how the world works, especially when it comes to fame. How one gets it. Why one gets it.

Jessie and Ellie still had a hard time believing that it was their own little Elijah who was appearing on all the late-night talk shows.

After the press converged on the diner, finding out that Elijah was not only the author of the letters but also an electrician, he quickly picked-up a new moniker—*The Terrorist Who Lights The Way*.

You could see it already, the line splayed across t-shirts below Elijah's smiling face. A nickname like that gets one noticed and invited to the late-night shows.

At first, Elijah said no. But Jesse and Ellie coaxed him into it. "How hard can it be?" Ellie prodded. "All you've got to do is be yourself. That's what the media likes. You. And no one does you better than you."

He was doing himself pretty well the night Jessie and Ellie were watching from Ellie's almost full diner. Business had never been better. Dinners were now as popular as breakfast. People were stopping in, just hoping to run into the Terrorist Who Lights The Way. Or to watch him on TV.

On tonight's show, the late-night host was congratulating Elijah on the fact that the Armed and Angry Retirement Plan seemed to be getting as much press as the Betterment Alliance. Both plans appeared to be offering people hope. The Betterment Alliance, by bribing politicians with money, which the Armed and Angry plan more or less hijacked from the politicians.

Strangely, the two plans worked better together than they did apart. Not only would legislation supported by the majority of the American people get

passed, but the money that was used to change the legislation would then be passed down to the people.

Elijah, of course, always played down the armed portion of the AARP. Just now, he was answering the late-night host by saying, "Angry, oh yes, people are angry. And being armed is just a fact of life for so many Americans these days. But that bloodshed with the twelve dead, no, that was terrible." He wasn't endorsing anything like that, he continued. In fact, the only reason he signed the letter armed and angry was because it sounded better than sincerely pissed.

When the audience laughed, Ellie turned to Jessie. "Who knew your partner was so funny?" she said with a smile.

"Not me," said Jessie, shaking his head. "But you know, what's not funny is that what Elijah did, the letter, he wrote it because he was serious. He thinks it's unfair how the politicians make all the money and just forget about us people who put them there. But does the world look at it as serious? No. I mean, everyone is just looking at it like it was a joke."

"There's already a meme on social media, Elijah for President," said Ellie.

"That's what I mean," said Jessie. "This country has lost hope that anything can happen that will create real change. So instead of trying to make a difference, everything is turned into a joke. The thing is, if you do get screwed over enough, you do get angry. Sure, they're making fun of the fact that Elijah signed it Armed and Angry, but the fact is that we are angry."

"And we are armed," added Ellie.

"We sure as hell are. I mean, seriously, Ellie, it's nothing to laugh at."

Ironically, a burst of laughter from the TV made them both turn to look. Whatever Elijah just said, they both missed it.

"What did he say, Joe?" yelled Ellie to a guy two stools down.

“He said that politicians are a lot like electricians. They both like the bright lights.”

“He’s right about that,” said Jessie. “But only the electrician has any clue as to how the lights actually work.”

FIFTY-SEVEN

There was no pre-show talk between them. Nothing along the lines of *nice to meet you* or, *these are the questions that I'll be asking*. And no signing of documents that said this or that line of questioning would be off the table. No, Warren thought to himself, this would not be a friendly discussion.

In fact, the first time Warren saw Brandon Cumberland was when Cumberland walked into the studio to sit in the chair across from him. Warren was already sitting down, on the set, looking around the studio. He had been in places like this before, in front of cameras. He never liked it. Too many chances to make a mistake. A mistake that would be shared with millions.

A quick look around told him that this studio was nothing out of the ordinary as far as studios go. It was a typical three-camera set-up. One for his close-up. One for Cumberland's. And a third camera for the two-shot of them both.

The biggest difference was the large contingent of people behind the cameras. More than he was expecting. He knew he shouldn't be surprised. With all the publicity promoting this reveal, this face-off, hell, the way the press was talking, it was as if the entire nation would be tuning in.

Meekins was there when Warren arrived at the studio. Nothing friendly about the man, Warren thought. Didn't even shake his hand. Instead, he handed Warren an envelope. Inside were the expected audience numbers for the evening. Inflated, no doubt, thought Warren. The price tag was highlighted in yellow at the bottom of the page, multiplied by two.

Warren looked at the number. Jesus. No wonder Meekins was smiling. Well, let's see how long that lasts, he said to himself.

Of course, Warren had brought Logan to be there with him. Putting the letter back in the envelope, he handed it to her as he headed to what he assumed would be his chair on the set. He noticed that Logan had settled into a seat that would be directly in his eye line if and when he looked slightly off to his left. It was reassuring that she was there, even though he knew that there wasn't much she could do once the cameras started rolling. He was on his own then, like he had felt he had been for the last couple of weeks, fighting his self-doubts. Was this the right thing to do? Couldn't there have been a better way to do it?

The DNN crew that was allowed in the studio had to sign a statement saying that they would not text who he was before the reveal happened, live, on TV. All their phones had to be turned over to a DNN executive before they took their positions behind the camera. And then, once Warren and Logan had entered, the doors to the studio were locked. That said, even if he backed out now, it was too late. Once everyone was reunited with their phones, he would be exposed. The best thing he could do was to defend his reason for doing what he was doing, as feeble as Cumberland was going to try and make him sound.

He saw that Roger Meekins had walked back into the studio and pulled a chair up behind Logan, making sure that he'd be in Warren's sightline the entire time as well. Probably there to unnerve him. Warren liked the fact that it was doing just the opposite.

Part of the reason that the world was losing hope was people like Meekins. Their way of peddling lies for profit and justifying it by saying that truth is subjective is what helped the world get to where it was. He was still a little surprised that Meekins took the deal. One hour. One guest. No commercial breaks, and no cutting the time short. If Cumberland didn't give

Warren the full hour, then Meekins wouldn't make any money, much less twice the going rate.

Obviously, Meekins wasn't going to give up a chance like that. And now that Warren saw how much it was—\$250 million times two for an hour on prime time TV. Hell, he'd probably gaffer tape Cumberland to his chair to make sure that he didn't leave the set and cut the hour short.

Warren had to assume that Cumberland wasn't happy with that part of the deal. That it had to be a full hour. If that is, Cumberland even knew about that part of the deal. Warren had to believe that Meekins wouldn't want Cumberland to know. It would give Cumberland too much power over Meekins and the network's purse strings. No, that part of the deal he probably kept to himself.

When Cumberland was pushed by a guest, he would usually just end the interview. Say they were out of time or something. That way, he would never lose an argument. And that was the one option that Nicholas didn't want to have available for this interview. No escape clause for Cumberland. He wanted to make sure that Warren had the full hour, so that he and Cumberland would have a chance to get to the truth of the matter.

At least, Warren Holt's idea of the truth.

They were gathered around a TV in Dick Andrews' office. Andrews had invited five fellow Senators to watch the reveal of the person behind the Betterment Alliance.

Everyone in the room knew that somehow they needed to turn the tide that seemed to be swelling against their party. Twelve dead at the gun

registration site was not doing the GOP any favors. People were clamoring for change. Already, the Betterment Alliance's tagline—*It Can Be Done*—t-shirts were becoming popular. Andrews had contacted Cumberland to tell him to pin the responsibility for those deaths on the founder of the Betterment Alliance during the interview. Cumberland told him not to worry. By the time the hour was over, he said no one would be blaming the GOP for what happened in Kentucky.

In fact, Cumberland was sounding rather confident that by the time the hour was over, the Betterment Alliance would be over as well.

That's what Andrews and his fellow Senators were counting on. That things would get back to normal and the lobbyists that they knew and loved would, once again, be the big money donors. After all, to be outbid for the character and integrity of one of his own party's Senators, well, that was something he never had to worry about before.

The oil and gas companies, the NRA—the money never stopped flowing from those organizations into the pockets of the GOP. It was considered one of the costs of doing business, a way to silence the critics and keep their businesses running.

But ever so slowly, the ground had been shifting.

Individuals, not companies, now had billions of dollars to spend on things they believed in. And Citizens United, thanks to the Supreme Court, had made it legal for them to spend it. No longer did it have to be based on their businesses continuing to make a profit. No. Today, rich individuals could spend money on so-called ethics and morals.

Fuck that, thought Andrews. Ethics and morals are fine for a Sunday morning, in a church, perhaps. But in politics? C'mon...politics was about making money, plain and simple. That's why he got into the fray in the first

place. Not because of some goddam ethics and morals. But because that's where the money was.

And if he wanted to remain minority leader, he knew that he had to make damn sure that that's where the money remained.

FIFTY-EIGHT

It was a trait that Warren had discovered since becoming a businessman. The ability to read people, size them up and understand what they were all about. It became an indispensable part of his negotiating repertoire.

Some referred to it as a sixth sense. If it was, it was one that Warren perfected through practice.

Many signs were obvious. Excessive twitching. Fiddling with their wedding ring. Tapping of feet. But it was the signs that most missed that were most telling to Warren. A single blink at the wrong time. A second glance at a watch. Or, even a smile when a smile wasn't called for. *Never underestimate the other person's insecurities* is something that Warren once read and had never forgotten.

Warren Holt watched as Brandon Cumberland briskly walked into the studio and ignored him completely as he sat down in the chair across from him. Not even the courtesy of an acknowledgment. Which is how, before even a single word was said, he knew that Cumberland was a phony.

He was heavily made-up, more obvious in person than when you saw him on camera. He was also shorter than Warren would have expected. Of course, he was always sitting for his program, so it was hard to tell just by watching him on TV. Dark blue blazer, light blue checked shirt, yellow tie, khaki pants, yup, the standard preppy look he always wore to try to show sincerity. A look that didn't really work on a man in his 50s, Cumberland's age. He didn't offer to shake Warren's hand before he sat down. Not that Warren would have accepted it. This was not going to be a friendly conversation. In fact, Cumberland said nothing as his microphone was attached to his shirt. Not

a damn word. All he did was look over at his producer as she counted down to one before pointing her finger at him. Looking towards the camera, he cleared his throat and begin.

“Good evening. I know that everyone has been waiting for this show with great anticipation, as tonight we are going to reveal the person that is behind the group that is doing its best to destroy democracy as we know it. This group calls itself the Betterment Alliance. A strange name, don’t you think, for an organization that is doing everything it can to make things much, much worse, not better, for this country?”

Glancing at one of the monitors, Warren saw that all the audience at home was seeing was the close-up of Cumberland. No two-shot. Nothing on him. His big reveal was still to come. Immediately, he realized what was happening. They wanted to give Cumberland some time to get in some shots free and clear before Warren was even revealed. And the shots were certainly coming.

“I was surprised when I found out who my guest is tonight, as I am sure you will be as well. And then again, I wasn’t. He is a wealthy individual, no shock there, I think now, what, the fifth wealthiest person in the world...and for some reason, he, and yes, it is a he, it is a man, has decided to use his wealth, his privilege, his status, to buy a way of life for all of us, whether we want it or not.”

Warren Holt started to feel himself fidget. Sure, he asked for no commercial breaks, so Cumberland would have no place or time to go hide. But Jesus, how much longer was this going to go on, this one-sided, slanted description of him before he would even have a chance to defend himself? Fuck this, he thought.

“Now hold on, Brandon,” he said. Since he was already mic’d-up, he knew it would be heard on the air. Cumberland stopped, surprised. He wasn’t done presenting his case, in fact, he was planning on spending the first 15 minutes doing just that. But if Holt was going to speak, shit, now he had no choice but to introduce him.

“It appears our guest would like to say something,” said Cumberland with an awkward smile. “So let me introduce you to who you’ve all been waiting to meet, the world’s 5th richest man, capitalist, globalist, destroyer of democracy...Warren Holt.

The monitor went to a single shot of Warren. “Since I paid for this hour,” he began with a smile, “I thought I should at least have the right to say something before the hour is over.” He turned to look right into the camera that he knew was on him. “You’ve probably heard that this will be a commercial-free hour. But you probably haven’t heard why. The reason is simple. It’s because, as I said, I paid for this hour by buying all the commercial time. In fact, I paid twice the going rate just so that we wouldn’t be interrupted. Isn’t that right, Brandon?”

As the cameras went to the two-shot, it caught Cumberland looking a little uncertain. He knew Meekins wanted the public to think that DNN was running this hour commercial-free because it was such an important moment for the country. After all, that’s how Meekins had advertised it.

“Well, that’s neither here nor there, is it?” countered Cumberland, awkwardly.

“Actually, it’s about both here and there,” said Warren. “This hour is about one thing and one thing only. Greed. And how greed is destroying not only our country, but our entire world.”

“Very rich, yes, that’s very rich indeed,” countered Cumberland with a no-pun-intended smile. “You, the 5th richest person in the world, saying greed is bad and that it is greed that is destroying the entire what? World, was it? Yes, so easy to criticize when you’ve already got yours, something like a hundred billion now, isn’t it?”

Without hesitation, Warren countered. “A hundred and fifty billion actually. Yes, I do have money. In fact, lots of it. And when you have as much as I do, it’s easy to spend it as you see fit.”

“And apparently you think it was ‘fit’ to use it to buy votes.”

“First off, stop with the holier-than-thou attitude. Buying votes is being done every day in this country. It’s unfortunately the way that our political system works.”

“It seems to me that you’re being just a little bit cynical,” Cumberland said with a squint, trying to act as naive as possible.

Warren Holt smiled. This was what he was waiting for. “Ah, your first squint. The look you use to tell your audience that you don’t understand what your guests are saying when you actually know exactly what they are saying. I mean, you’re not as dumb as your squint tries to make us believe, Brandon. So what I’m going to do is count the number of squints I get from you over-the-course of our hour. For those counting along at home, that’s one.”

Cumberland wasn’t quite sure how to take this in. He had never been challenged on his squint before. It had always worked for him, no questions asked. And here Holt was calling him on it, pointing out how phony he was. Quickly, he went back to the topic they had just left.

“Since you want to talk about greed, it appears that you want to talk about money, Mr Holt. No doubt because you have a lot of it.”

Warren shook his head. "I'd rather talk about hope. But if money can buy hope, so be it. But before we go there, I'd like to say that you are very good at what you do."

Cumberland squinted again, surprised by Warren's change in the conversation. And especially since Holt was complimenting him.

Seeing the squint, Warren smiled. "That's two," he said directly into the camera. "And by very good at what you do, I mean that you never prove anything you say. Or, disprove anything you say. You just make everyone doubt everything. No use of facts supporting or denying, so that sure, anything you say *could* be true."

"And I'm supposed to take that as a compliment?"

"As you wish. But it seems to me that it's a little like saying Jeffrey Dahmer was really good at killing innocent people."

As Brandon Cumberland squinted again, this time angrily at Warren Holt, Warren held up three fingers. "Three, if you're counting along at home," he said, smiling to the camera. "So here's the way this conversation will probably go. You'll suggest some crazy theory like I'm promoting hate versus hope, which will become credible simply because when I deny it, you will say that I'm only denying it because I am covering something up. Which, of course, only proves that you are right. And if I don't deny it, then you will counter by saying that it must be true because I'm not denying it. In other words, there is no way for me to win."

Brandon Cumberland shook his head, but before he could respond, Warren Holt continued. "Now be careful how you answer, Brandon, because if you try to deny what I just said, my response will be that you are covering up, so it must be true."

"And if I don't deny it?"

“Then, of course, it is true, right?”

It was Brandon Cumberland’s turn to smile. “Very good, Mr Holt, very good. But not at all correct. You see, what I do is make people think. I don’t draw conclusions for them. I consider my audience to be intelligent enough to do that for themselves. For example, I would make the argument that hope is a very woke concept.”

Now it was Warren Holt’s turn to smile. “Ah, yes. The wonderful word of *woke*. Could you define woke for me, Brandon?”

“Woke is trying to make this country something that it was never meant to be. Embarrassed at itself.”

Warren Holt started to applaud. “That is very good, Brandon. A very good definition, indeed. Embarrassed at itself? Really? This country? For understanding the truth about itself?”

“The truth? I don’t think...”

But Warren cut him off. “You do know the actual definition of woke, right? It’s a past tense of being awake. But, if you want to talk about the slang definition, it means being alert to racial prejudice and discrimination. Or, you could expand it to mean being aware of, and paying attention to, important issues in society. Has it gone too far in one direction? No argument. But the definition of woke that you shared with us, Brandon, is the political one. You try to turn it into an ideology which it was never intended to be. Or in other words, you have weaponized the word.”

“So say you.”

“You see, there you go. You take a fact—the definition of woke—and you try to make it an opinion rather than the fact that it is. And let’s be clear. It’s not me who is saying it. It’s the dictionary that I’m quoting. But, according to you, what is woke is anything that has to do with change and progress. The

thing is that change happens, progress happens, whether we like it or not. Sometimes, change is about a small group or minority wanting recognition. To be accepted. To be seen. This can be frightening to many because this minority is seen as different. And since we don't like things that are different, and we don't want to be perceived as racists or puritans, we call this group, and the things they're asking for, woke. I would go so far as to say that in some instances, not all mind you, but in some, people use the word woke like a get out of jail free card for being a racist."

Cumberland was staring at him as if he were an idiot.

"And then, before we know it, the *wokification* of change and progress includes anything somebody on the right dislikes. I mean, isn't that how you defined it just a moment ago? As everything that's bad for America.

Now, does the left sometimes push their so-called radical left agenda too hard, without any acknowledgement of the fear that they create in those with more conservative values?

Absolutely.

Just as the right sometimes hides behind the word woke because they can't say out loud what they truly want to say.

In this sense, the word woke obfuscates everything. I believe that an argument can be made that anti-wokeness is now almost as harmful as wokeness once was. A suggestion would be to take the word woke out of the vocabulary completely and let people say what they really mean."

Cumberland was shaking his head. "It sounds to me like you are trying to diminish the righteous indignation that people have when their lives have to change to accommodate a minority."

"Not at all. Our political leaders are charged with serving all Americans. When a small community—say 1% of all Americans—demands a change in

something, say like bathroom accessibility, maybe that's something we can acknowledge but not actually enact. Over time, minds might be won over. Might not. As they say, time will tell. But the time needed for that to be accepted must be taken into account. And honored. The left has to slow down, I agree with you there when it comes to forcing, or trying to force that change on people."

Cumberland was nodding slowly. He couldn't help but agree with Holt's last statement.

"But on the other side, my fear is that when science, which is the proving of fact, when intelligence, which derives from education, when clean energy is labeled as being either left or right, when those who are smarter than the rest of us, the intelligentsia, are considered woke and therefore inferior and not to be listened to, then we as a society are seriously in trouble. After all, if we are not aware of the issues affecting society, then by definition, we are not woke. Which means we are asleep. If the right, your audience, is not woke, then what they are is unaware of what is actually going on in the world. Is that how you see your audience, Brendon? Asleep and unaware? I mean earlier, I thought I heard you describe them as intelligent."

Brendon Cumberland was squinting once again at Warren Holt. Seeing this, Warren held up four fingers to the camera. "And I have to say, actually, Brandon, saying that your audience is unawake is a pretty good definition of the right. No, wait, let me rephrase that. Not unawake. Unaccepting is a better word. Unaccepting that change actually happens. And if you refuse to believe or accept that change does occur in life and in society, well, I guess that does mean that you are, in some ways, asleep."

Watching from behind the cameras, Meekins had to stifle a smirk. Intelligent? The DNN audience? Stop. He knew what they were; he had all the data. And what the data showed was that those who watched DNN were primarily white, less educated, more rural, poorer, churchgoing, and older. But intelligent? No. Hardly.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, he saw that they were only twenty minutes in. Twenty minutes and he was already feeling uncomfortable. This wasn't going anywhere near the way he was expecting it to go. Glancing over at Logan Jamison, he couldn't help but notice that she was smiling. Damn it! He was the one who was supposed to be enjoying this hour. Not her.

Normally, if one of his 'hosts' were being pummeled, he'd signal to the control room to cut to a commercial. He did in fact use commercial breaks like a trainer uses the bell in a boxing match. When your boxer is getting the shit kicked out of him, the bell can save him.

But in this case, there were no bells or whistles that he could use to save Cumberland. Not if he wanted the advertising dollars. No, Brandon was on his own. Which is why when he saw Cumberland glance over at him as he normally did when he wanted to be bailed out with a commercial, Meekins did the only thing he could.

He looked away.

FIFTY-NINE

So far so good, thought Nicholas to himself. He and Anthony were watching the interview at Anthony's place. Anthony had just come back into the room, carrying a bottle of wine and two glasses.

Looking around, Nicholas asked, "Logan's staying where, in the guest room?"

Anthony nodded as he poured some wine into both glasses before handing one to Nicholas.

"And only in the guest room?"

Anthony sighed. "I know what you're thinking, Nic. And to be honest, I've been tempted to, you know, wander down, knock on her door, make sure she's doing all right."

Nicholas stared skeptically over at Anthony, who defensively held up his hands.

"But no, I've been a good boy. Not that it's been easy, I gotta tell you."

"You know it's your fucking around that's already fucked us up," Nicholas reminded him. "We wouldn't be watching this interview now if you had kept your pants on with that freelancer."

"C'mon, Nic. You saw her. I mean, really. I'm innocent. And there were extenuating circumstances."

"Such as?"

"She got undressed first."

"Fuck me," Nicholas said, shaking his head.

"Basically, yeah, that's what she said. Without actually saying it, of course."

"Yeah, but with Logan..."

“No, with Logan, I’m cool. I’m cool. I won’t fuck this up. But I gotta tell you, I’ve been getting some vibes from her side.”

Nicholas had noticed it as well. He’d catch Logan glancing over at Anthony. They’d be subtle looks, quick looks. But they were there nonetheless. And what could he really do about it? They were both adults. They could make up their own minds. Just like Logan and Holt could. Did those two have something going on? That he didn’t know. He could only suspect. Holt was unattached. He liked beautiful women. He was always around Logan. If it was him...but before he could carry that thought any further, he was interrupted by what Cumberland was saying on TV.

“I would argue that the only reason you are here tonight is to burnish your reputation through this so-called Betterment Alliance and to protect your opportunity to make more money—allowing you, the way it looks—to do more social damage. A billionaire with a conscience? What an oxymoron. I mean, I understand why you like this image of a benevolent savior. But your entire history, how you’ve made your money, has been through dehumanizing labor practices, tax avoidance, and influence peddling. I would go so far as to say that what you are doing now is nothing more than an extremely expensive PR scam. Trying to burnish your image before it’s too late. Because in my opinion, it’s you, and people like you, that are the actual cause of many problems the world faces, not its savior. And what you are doing here is more out of ego self-preservation than it is out of the goodness of your heart.”

Warren Holt was nodding. Nodding? Agreeing? What the fuck? That seemed strange to Nicholas.

“You are absolutely right, Brandon,” Holt answered. I’m not spending this money out of the goodness of my heart. I’m a businessman. I like making money. And as I mentioned, I’m good at it. But here’s the thing. If the

population of the world loses hope in its leaders, hope that governments as a whole will step up and do what is right, and hope that those in charge can actually change, then democracy will be replaced by anarchy everywhere. Hope will be replaced by hate. When anarchy and hate rule the world, businesses, my businesses, lose money. And as I just mentioned, I don't like doing that."

"So now you want us to believe that it's just for capitalistic reasons that you're selling what you are calling hope."

Warren shrugged his shoulders. "Just like you could argue that it's for capitalistic reasons that you have me on the air tonight. Your network will make a lot of money because of this interview. So don't act like you or your network are better than me on this. In fact, that's one point that I think the Betterment Alliance is *trying* to make clear. Anything and everything in this world that is of any consequence is done because of money. *Everything* is bought and paid for. Both good deeds and bad deeds. Sure, you could argue that it's un-American to pay for votes. But there is also a valid argument that today, it is the most American thing of all. Once we admit that, and make it obvious, like the Betterment Alliance is trying to do by making its offers of money public, then we can go about making changes in the way things operate."

"By buying off politicians."

"As you well know, what you call buying a politician—or what is more politely called 'a political donation'— is regarded as a cost of doing business by most corporations today. The same is true for high-net-worth individuals like myself. The reason we buy a politician is because we find it a cost-efficient way to change laws so that we can *legally* increase our profits. But, because it is frowned on by most, considered to be unethical, corporations and wealthy

individuals do it under the table. The only thing the Betterment Alliance is doing differently is buying politicians publicly, out in the open. And by advertising it, as the Betterment Alliance is doing, by shoving it in people's faces on prime time TV, it has the chance to make enough people angry and demand that change occurs."

"The reason most people frown at what you are doing is because buying politicians is called graft."

"I believe that the oil companies, the NRA...I believe those on your so-called side, I believe that they would disagree with you. What you are calling graft, they all call lobbying."

Another squint.

Seeing it, Warren Holt held up five fingers to the camera and smiled before continuing..

"And if what I am doing is to be considered graft, then at least it is honest graft as it is out in the open. It's not done behind closed doors. Most money that is funneled into politics is to sway policy away from the will of the majority and to direct it to the interests of those who are giving the money. Is it corruption? Certainly. Corruption is when individuals use public power for private ends. It devours from within. Is it illegal? Is it a crime? No. But it is corrupt. So we do it in the dark behind closed doors with the shades drawn."

"If you say so..."

Warren was shaking his head. "No, no...this is not my opinion or an *if I say so* sort of thing. You do that all the time. You take what is a fact and try to make people think that it's just an opinion. What's dangerous is that you're very good at convincing people that they just didn't see what they just saw. That they didn't really hear what they just heard. But not this time, Brandon. No. So, think about it. If a politician supported what the majority of the people

wanted, then he or she wouldn't need to be paid under the table to do so. They would be 'paid' in votes during the next election. They would stay in office. But that's not the way it works. They still want the votes, don't get me wrong, but they also want the money. That's why they take the money quietly, out of the limelight, in the dark, behind closed doors, under the table. Right now, we have vested interests and the people's interests. Often, at least when money is involved, they are two very different things. All the Betterment Alliance is trying to do is align them."

"By bribing politicians. The exact same thing that you are trying to stop?"

"Irony, isn't it? But, yes. Currently, the American people are trying to fight money with votes. This has become, and unfortunately, will remain, a losing proposition. I mean, money has and always will smother the basic impulses of conscience. I'm just trying to level the playing field. It only makes sense that if it's money that's keeping politicians *from* serving the public interest, then it will take even more money *to* get them *to* serve the public interest."

"And turn democracy into an auction?" Brendon Cumberland was obviously frustrated. "This is so far from the American Way that it—and you, by the way—you make me sick."

"It has become the American Way and what has become sick is democracy. It has become an auction thanks to Citizens United, the ruling the Supreme Court made in 2010. Our whole idea of democracy can't work, it won't work, if money is allowed to trump the will of the people. And thanks to Citizens United, that is exactly what is happening."

"Well," Brandon retorted, "you have certainly used money to trump the will of the GOP voter. First with climate change legislation and now with guns."

Warren Holt could only shrug his shoulders in frustration as he softly said, "Yes, I can see how it can be looked at that way. But, if we're talking democracy, then we are talking the will of the majority, not the will of one party versus the other. Everything the Betterment Alliance has spent money on was to persuade the legislative branch to honor the will of the majority. It just so happens that it's more often than not the GOP that is thwarting the will of the majority. Why that is the case is certainly another topic we could talk about, but I doubt you would want to go there on this show. You could lose some viewers."

As a silence fell over the set, Brandon Cumberland, looking for some guidance, sneaked a look over at Meekins who was pacing behind the cameras. Meekins knew that silence is never good on a set. He was about to signal something to Cumberland when Holt broke the silence.

"Have you ever been bitten by a poisonous snake, Brandon?"

Cumberland squinted at the non-sequitur. But this time the squint was real. Brandon was truly confused by this line of questioning.

"The antidote for a snake bite is created by antibodies which have been developed through low doses of the venom itself. In other words, what is used to fight the poison from a snake is poison from the snake."

"So you are saying that the American people are snake-bit and need to be inoculated with poison?"

"I don't think the American people are snake-bit, no. I think it is the politicians who are. It's they who have become corrupt through money. And, yes, sometimes you have to fight fire with fire. Or as I just explained, poison with poison. And if money is what is burning down democracy, then perhaps money is what is needed to try and save it. What is the line the NRA likes to use? The only way to stop a bad man with a gun..."

Cumberland finished the line... “is a good man with a gun. Yeah. So?”

“So doesn’t it also work that the only way to stop a bad man with money is a good man with money?”

Cumberland answered with a cackle. “And you’re trying to sell yourself as the good man. Bit of a stretch, don’t you think?”

Warren Holt ignored the jab. He was trying his best to remain calm. He knew losing his temper would mean losing the argument. Count to ten, he told himself. Count to ten. And then, respond.

“What I think, Brandon, is that to reveal corruptness, you have to offer corruptness. To make it highly visible. It is in darkness and in shadow where evil lies. And it is in the darkness where democracy dies. But by making the corruption visible, there’s a chance that enough people will demand change. If change starts to happen, then hope has a chance to follow. People are intrinsically good, including politicians—maybe even you—but greed blinds even the best people. They don’t know what to do or how to act, so they take the money and hope nobody calls them on it. It’s human nature. All we are trying to do is get human nature back to being naturally human.”

“Cute,” said Cumberland. He had to try to hide his smile at Holt’s turn of phrase. The guy was good—there was no doubt about that. And he came with an agenda; there was no doubt about that either. Somehow, he had to get him off that agenda. To rattle him. To shake him up. To...

“And by the way,” continued Holt. I don’t think it’s only the politicians who are corrupt. It’s also certain people in the media who seemed to have lost their trust in the truth.”

Brandon Cumberland smiled. Yep, there it was. The word truth. That’s what he was looking for. Thank you, Mr Holt.

SIXTY

Logan Jamison was enjoying herself.

Of course, she had expected Warren to do well, but even she was surprised by how well he was doing. Looking behind her, she noticed that Roger Meekins was no longer sitting. What she didn't realize is that he hadn't been sitting for some time. Meekins couldn't sit still when he was nervous. And right about now, he was more than a little nervous.

This wasn't going anywhere close to what he had expected. No, not at all. And he always made certain that things went exactly as he expected. Every hour of news on his network was like staging a play or casting a movie. He knew what the script was, who would play what role, and how the movie would end before he went on air. But this was different. Holt was good. Much better than he had given him credit for. Cumberland could handle most anyone he had on. Granted, most of those he had on were guests who agreed with his way of thinking. They never really pushed back or argued. After all, *give the audience what they want* was the network's unspoken motto. Make them feel smarter for tuning in because, hey, Brandon and his guests keep saying that I'm right. It's the other side; they are the ones who are wrong. Yeah, sure. Whatever keeps the viewers watching. But now, here was Holt saying the opposite. That Cumberland and everyone who watched DNN were wrong.

The only positive so far was that he knew this hour would be his highest-rated ever. Sure, some of his tried and true viewers would be upset that he had someone of Holt's leanings on his network. But they'd get over it. And Cumberland would *eventually* handle Holt. After all, he still had just under half an hour to cut him down to size. To make him out to be the phony that

Meekins thought all those overly-rich fuckers were. At least that's what he was counting on.

C'mon, Brandon, Meekins thought to himself. Attack the bastard. Drill him a new one.

He saw that Logan had turned around and noticed him pacing. What was worse was that she was smiling. She could see the nervousness in him. That wasn't supposed to happen. The only one who was ever supposed to be smiling in his studio was him.

The word 'truth', almost shouted by Cumberland, brought his attention back to what was happening on set.

That a boy, thought Meekins. About time you got fucking angry.

"Truth?" Brandon Cumberland said it again, but this time the word was loaded with sarcasm.

"You actually want us to believe that what you are spouting out here, now, this evening, about your desire to create something as amorphous as hope, is the truth? Maybe it's the truth believed by wealthy capitalists, globalists, progressives, and elitists, in other words, the woke Democratic Party. But it's not the truth as real people see it. You mention the will of the people...c'mon. It's *your* will that you are trying to force *on* the people. And you justify it by saying that it's what the people want. Seriously? What the people want is food on their table and being able to pay their mortgage and fill up their cars with gas without going into hock. Because that's the cold truth that faces them every day. Their truth is that life is hard. And people like you are not making it any easier for them. If you really want to do something

worthwhile with your riches, why don't you buy food for the people that you claim you are so worried about, so that they can eat."

Warren Holt paused. Once again, he slowly counted to ten. Then he began.

"There's an old saying, Brandon, perhaps you're familiar with it. There are three sides to every story. Your side. My side. And the truth. And the truth is that today we live in a truth-challenged world. You're right about that, Brandon. Opinion and fact are now indistinguishable. But you are wrong to imply that the Betterment Alliance has a party affiliation. Trying to bring hope to the world isn't a woke, Democratic issue. It's bipartisan.

"Wait, wait. Stop. No." Waving his arms, Cumberland interrupted. "The most recent piece of legislation that you bribed legislators to pass was for gun registration and purchase age increases. Both very much liberal agenda, woke issues."

Warren Holt was nodding his head in agreement. "Granted. That said, they were both also what the majority of Americans wanted."

"The majority of Democrats, maybe."

"Democrats, Yes. And also of all Americans, regardless of party. In regard to guns, the will of the majority of Americans was being held hostage by a minority in the Senate. And the reason is quite simple. It is in the financial self-interest of certain GOP Senators to allow the slaughter of innocent children in our schools to continue."

"Financial self-interest? Really? I see you've forgotten something called the Second Amendment."

"Not forgotten about it, no. In fact, it's critical to this whole discussion. You know who drafted the Second Amendment, don't you, Brandon?"

"I believe it was Madison."

“It was. James Madison. And in so doing, he made no mention in the amendment of an individual’s right to possess a gun for self-defense or recreational use. Don’t you find that interesting?”

Brandon Cumberland didn’t answer, letting his squint do the talking for him.

“What Madison did write—and what the Second Amendment says in regards to why someone has a right to possess a gun—is in the first thirteen words in the amendment. Those first thirteen words say that our right to possess guns is as part of...as part of...a well-regulated militia. That is what shall not be infringed. To possess guns as part of a well-regulated militia. The 2nd Amendment is only, in total, twenty-seven words long. Today, we have one of our political parties ignoring the first thirteen words of the 2nd Amendment and think it’s only about the last fourteen words, and primarily, the last four—*shall not be infringed*. The two political parties are semantically disagreeing over a 27-word amendment. And that semantic disagreement is causing innocent lives to be lost.”

Brandon Cumberland’s head snapped back as if he’d been slapped.

“Speaking of lives being lost,” Cumberland smirked, “twelve were, in fact, lost recently in Kentucky. Twelve beautiful souls that would be alive today if it wasn’t for your so-called Betterment Alliance bribing politicians to change their vote.”

Here we go, thought Warren. The blame game. He knew that it was coming. He just didn’t know how, or when, Cumberland was going to slip it in. Looking over at Logan, he saw her flash him an encouraging smile.

Cumberland was continuing. “How can you sit here and say it’s hope you’re trying to bring into the world. It seems to me that what you’re actually bringing into this world is death. Death and hate. Hate, not hope, Mr Holt.”

Warren was nodding. Turning to the camera, he looked right into it. "The fact that twelve people lost their lives, I would agree that's inexcusable. But instead of blaming others, let me just say that if any of those families that lost loved ones in this tragedy think that the Betterment Alliance was in any way responsible, I do offer my sincere apologies to those families. Hopefully, with the new gun laws now being passed, lives that would have been lost in the future will be saved."

He then turned back to Cumberland. "But I'm glad you brought Kentucky up, Brandon, because it ties into the AARP, the so-called Armed and Angry Retirement Plan."

"No, no, no, no, no, no." Cumberland was demonstrably shaking his head. He wasn't going to allow this. "Are you trying to blame those killings on the Armed and Angry crowd?"

"I'm not. No, not at all. In fact, I think Armed and Angry and the Betterment Alliance are both pushing for the same thing."

Cumberland looked incredulous. But this time, his squint was genuine. "The same thing? Really? This should be interesting. Please. Enlighten me."

"Well, what I think we are both trying to do is restore fairness to our country."

Brandon Cumberland once again responded with his he-haw of a laugh. "Fairness?"

"Yes. Fairness."

Again, Cumberland's confused look was sincere. "I can understand Armed and Angry wanting fairness. But you?"

Do you think it's fair that someone like me, who has a net worth of over \$150 billion, pays less than 8% in taxes? In other words, less than a school teacher pays in taxes. Do you think it's fair that American millionaires and

billionaires, people like you and me, are currently avoiding paying over \$100 billion a year in taxes to the U.S. government? I mean, no wonder those that call themselves Armed and Angry are angry.”

Cumberland jumped in. “Any and all tax laws that I follow are completely legal.”

“Legal, yes. You’re right. They are legal. But are they fair? Those with money pay legislators under the table to enact laws that make it legal for us to pay so little in taxes. Do politicians eagerly take the money? You bet. Do you realize that the current salary for a rank-and-file House or Senate member is \$174,000. And yet, the percentage of millionaires in Congress is over 50%. So, yes, when I look at Armed and Angry, what I see them fighting for is fairness. Instead of this money going to a Congressman, they want it to go to the American people. As do I.”

“So why, if you are feeling so conscientious, why don’t you just pay some of that \$120 million that you’re paying to a Super PAC, why don’t you just pay it directly to the American people?”

“I would like to, by being taxed at a fair rate. But am I? No.”

“That’s easy to fix, isn’t it? Just pay more. I’m sure Uncle Sam wouldn’t turn you down if you want to pay more than eight percent,” Cumberland smirked.

“Yes. I could do that. But what I’d rather do is change the system. A system that is currently rigged in favor of people like me, by people like me. Not just here, in this country, but throughout the world. That’s why people everywhere, all around the world, are losing hope. The amount of money that a few individuals possess is so large now, I mean, let me put it in some perspective. Have you ever stopped to figure out how large the difference is between a million and a billion?”

When Cumberland shook his head no, Warren Holt continued.

“Let’s do it in terms of seconds. A million seconds adds up to 12 days. A billion seconds adds up to...c’mon, wager a guess, Brandon.”

Cumberland held up his hands as a sign he didn’t know.

“A billion seconds adds up to 32 years. That’s how large the difference is between a million and a billion. Twelve days, versus 32 years. And I have over one hundred and fifty billion in net worth. Think about that. And here I’m only the world’s fifth richest. Never before, Brandon, never before has so much wealth been trusted in the hands of individuals. We can literally buy anything we want. And politicians, just so you know, politicians are relatively cheap to buy. I mean, in this country, we used to have a red party and a blue party. That’s gone. The only color that parties march to now is green. And to me, that is why people have lost any hope that governments can actually be run fairly. We have problems, big problems—the types of problems that can only be solved by government interaction. But, if solving these problems affects the wealthy, they’ll make sure those problems are ignored. Louis Brandeis said it best. You know Louis Brandeis, right?”

“A Supreme Court justice, if I’m not mistaken.”

“You’re not. He was. Back in 1941. And what he said was that ‘we can either have a democracy in this country or we can have great wealth concentrated in the hands of the few, but we can’t have both.’ Can you imagine a Supreme Court Justice saying that today?”

‘Are you saying Supreme Court justices are crooked?’

“I’m saying that no one—Supreme Court justices included—is immune to large amounts of money. No one. And that is why democracies around the world, including ours, are crumbling.”

“And you would change it how?”

“In this country, it starts with overturning or reversing Citizens United. We need a new law, call it, I don’t know...if it’s reversing Citizens United, then reverse the name, call it something like United Citizens...and have it be a law that limits the amount any entity—corporation or individual—can contribute to a politician, party or PAC.”

“Do you have an amount in mind?”

“I do. Twenty-five thousand max.”

“And you think a politician would vote for that?”

Warren Holt held up his thumb and forefinger and rubbed them together, indicating that they would certainly vote that way if the money was right.

“It’s all about money to you, isn’t it?”

Holt finally got upset. His face started to flush, and his voice rose.

“It’s all about the money to everyone,” he practically shouted. “That’s why democracy...” Warren paused, trying to calm down...telling himself to count to ten before continuing. “Here’s the thing: if we don’t change the law, by this time next year, democracy will be doomed.”

“Aren’t you being just a tad bit overly dramatic?”

“Well, either I’m overly dramatic or you’re underly paranoid. So let me ask you a question, Brandon. Have you heard the phrase hope dies last? It is a rough translation from German from around the time of the Holocaust. And what it means is when hope is gone, it’s over. Humanity gives up. And I think today, that is where we are at. Hope is on its last legs. Into its last dance, so to speak. When hope goes, apathy is what comes in to replace it. Apathy is not based on a lack of concern or lack of caring. Rather, it’s created through a feeling of impotence. We feel impotent about having the ability to change anything. To fight the enormous amounts of money that are now controlling

the world. So we stop trying. And it's this feeling of impotence that allows the autocrats to move in and gain power. I mean, just look at the number of democracies that are collapsing around the world.

"A feeling of impotence, huh? I guess you've had some issues with impotence yourself; that's why you know so much about it." It was nasty, and Brandon knew it, but he couldn't help himself.

Warren Holt could only smile at the childish insult as he waved it aside.

"Unfortunately, here's the thing, Brandon. Apathy is fostered by people like you and this network when you lie to the American people. Truth and trust are the mortar that binds democracy. When you twist the truth, when you say that there are alternative facts, when you say that truth is only an opinion, then you open the door to chaos. You do realize, don't you, that when you do that, which you do on your broadcast, what you are actually doing is playing footsie with autocracy? When you allow your journalistic integrity to be replaced by financial interests, when your lies become accepted as truth, then yes, you are helping to allow democracy to wither and eventually die."

"I see," Brandon said, smiling and nodding as he did so. "So now you're going to attack me and say that I've sacrificed my journalistic integrity? That I'm promoting autocracy."

"I am. For money. Yes. Democracy is based on shared truths. If we, as a society, share lies instead of truths, then we are creating a platform from which autocracy can grow. And you and this network, by sharing lies, are the major builders of this platform."

Warren quickly stole a glance at Logan. He could see that she was looking perplexed. She could always tell when he had something up his sleeve. But this time, he hadn't discussed anything about what he had in mind with her beforehand. Where's he going with this, she thought.

“I mean, take this hour,” he continued. “I’m paying for the ad revenue that your network, the Democracy News Network, would have made if they ran ads. In fact, as I mentioned, I am paying twice the going rate, just so that we would not have any interruptions. Your boss, Roger Meekins, handed me an invoice when I walked in tonight. Do you know how much it was for?”

Cumberland stared meekly at Holt, but said nothing.

“Half a billion.”

Cumberland’s reaction made it obvious that he had no idea that it was this much. He had to try to hide his shock as he responded,

“I am aware that you agreed to pay for the commercial time, yes.”

“Well, what you might not be aware of, as I figure that your boss wouldn’t have mentioned this to you, is that the show has to run for the full hour. In other words, if for any reason you leave the set before an hour is up, I don’t have to pay a cent. You see, I didn’t want you trying to run when the talk got tough.”

Brandon Cumberland looked off set to see if he could find Meekins. Where is that fucker, he thought. And why didn’t he mention this to me? Turning back to Holt, he continued. “As if I would run.”

“But now you are arguing that you have journalistic integrity, that your stretching of the truth is not just to keep your viewers tuning in and make money for your network.”

Brandon again looked for Meekins. There he was, almost hidden, pacing behind one of the cameras. And why was he looking down and not at him?

Warren Holt looked at his watch and then back at Brandon.

“We have now been on the air for 52 minutes. I guess one way to prove your fealty to integrity over income would be to walk off the set, let’s say at the

55-minute mark. In other words, in 2 and a half minutes, depriving your network of over five hundred million dollars.”

This stopped Meekins pacing. Now he was staring at Cumberland with a look of panic on his face. He wouldn’t dare, Meekins thought to himself. He wouldn’t fucking dare.

“Integrity or income? It’s your choice, Brandon. If you choose integrity, if you stand up from that chair and leave, you’ll still have an audience tomorrow. People will believe that you speak honestly and truthfully. But, if you choose instead to stay, you’ll prove that what you do and say is only for financial reasons, and chances are that you will have no credibility with any audience tomorrow. And that could prove to be quite devastating if your rumored presidential aspirations are actually true. So, which will it be?”

Warren Holt once again looked down at his watch.

“Time is ticking,” he said.

When he looked up, Brandon Cumberland was gone.

As the cameras were still running, the voice that all of America heard next was that of Roger Meekins.

“Fuck me!

SIXTY-ONE

Sometimes things start slowly.

This wasn't one of those times.

Over the course of 48 hours, the following happened:

The Betterment Alliance website was overrun with hate mail and crashed. When it got back up and running, all people saw was *For More Information, go to itcanbedone.com*

Brendon Cumberland was fired from the Democracy News Network. Holding a press conference, he announced that he was running for president under the pledge of bringing integrity back to the office, and hope back to America.

Logan Jamison's home was broken into and ransacked. Anthony offered her a permanent room at his place. She accepted.

Dick Andrews announced that he would be stepping down as minority leader, effective immediately.

United Citizens became the name of a Super PAC promising to focus all of its efforts on getting Citizens United reversed. Immediately, a \$500 million donation came in from an undisclosed source.

Elijah, once an electrician, was asked to be the lead spokesman for the United Citizens Super PAC.

Around the world, people started rising up against the political systems of greed, uniting under a global organization called *Creating Hope* and using the URL *ItCanBeDone.com*. When asked about funding, they mentioned a \$3 billion donation from an undisclosed source.

Warren Holt was asked to be the keynote speaker at Davos. Upon accepting, he said his speech would be titled *How Giving Away \$3 Billion Can Feel Better Than Sex*.

Anthony and Nicholas met at their favorite restaurant and shared one more bottle of wine. Once Anthony had poured some into each glass, he held his up for a toast.

“Well, it was fun while it lasted,” he said with a smile.

“That it was,” answered Nicholas, clinking his glass with Anthony’s.

After they each took a sip, Anthony shook his head. “A five billion dollar budget, and we spent what, 20% of that?”

“A little under, I think.”

“And we get only 10% of what we spent?”

Nicholas nodded.

“For creating hope in the world. Go fucking figure.”

“That was the deal.”

“Should have spent more, would have made more.”

“Well, it seems like Holt found a good use for the other \$3 billion.”

“Yeah, I guess. So, got any more clients lined up?”

"Funny enough, that new group that got Holt's \$3 billion..."

"Called *Creating Hope*, right?"

"Yeah. Well...they gave me a call."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Wanted to know if we were free."

"Free as in like to work for them? I mean, you said yes, right?"

"Nope."

"Nope?"

Nicholas shook his head.

"But...why...Nic...I mean?"

"Because we're not free, Anthony."

Seeing Anthony's puzzled face, Nicholas started to laugh.

"Ten percent, baby. That's the deal. Always ten percent."