

# PRAIRIE FIRE

A NOVEL

*Dan Armstrong*

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## Prairie Fire

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“You don’t need a weather man to know which way the wind blows.”  
—Bob Dylan

## PROLOGUE

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There was something weighing on Nathaniel Cromwell as he went to bed the night of June 21<sup>st</sup>. There was something weighing on all the farmers across America's heartland as spring turned to summer that year and the winter wheat came to harvest. The American farm community had been up against it many times in the past fifty years, but deep into the second decade of the new millennium, things seemed different, more urgent. Talk at dinner tables across the Midwest during the middle of June grew tough and caustic—or gave in to glum silence.

The farmers were frustrated for a whole lot of reasons, from subsidy politics to the skyrocketing price of petroleum products to recent fluctuations in the grain market. *Fluctuations, hell, out and out manipulation is what a lot of folks were calling it!* One way or the other, all agreed. Things had been pinching in pretty hard on the small guy of late. The cost of farming, human and financial, didn't quite seem worth it anymore.

Nathaniel Cromwell knew the story as well as anyone. Though he'd spent sixteen years in the Army, he was a third generation farmer and the last ten years had raised wheat and feed-grade corn on the Kansas farm he'd grown up on. After a long day of work, the retired Colonel went to bed early on the twenty-first of June with all the same questions in his head that his neighbors had, figuring good times and bad times were like the weather—they came and they went. But he woke from a restless sleep that night just before two with light filtering into the room like it was daybreak. He rolled out of bed rubbing his eyes and crossed the room to the window. He pushed aside the curtains to the sight of flames flaring all across the western horizon as far as he could see.

Cromwell pulled on his jeans and boots half asleep, stumbled down the hallway, denying what he was thinking, and shouted out to his son in full alarm. "Will, up! Quick! There's a fire at Tom's place."

His mother Mary appeared in the doorway to her room in a worn flannel nightgown. "What's going on, Nate?" Her tone suggested she already knew.

Cromwell was punching numbers into the kitchen phone. "Big fire at Foster's, Ma." He glared at the receiver. "And their phone's out of order! Call 911. Tell Will to follow me in his jeep. I'm outta here."

Cromwell burst out the back door and into his pickup. Nothing but a cloud of dust down a half-mile of driveway, he slid into a left climbing through gears like surges of adrenaline headed south on Route 6. He drove like he didn't know what was going on, but he knew. In his gut he knew.

Three miles down the road, he spotted two pickups pulled off at the edge of a scorched and smoldering wheat field. He recognized his neighbors right away. Horace Thompson hung on to a CB mike stretched out the window of his Ford. James Peabody, the county grange rep, knelt on one knee like he always did, a fist to his chin. Standing beside him was Tom Foster's wife Jenny, her shoulders slumped down around her waist. All three of them were staring west, hypnotized by the wall of fire lighting up the Kansas night like midday.

They turned in unison as Cromwell's truck skidded to a stop beside them. He leaned out the window. "Where's the containment going to be?" He saw the tears on Jenny's cheeks before she bowed her head.

James Peabody stood slowly. "It's all been contained, Nate. Down the length of Route 6 to 405. The wind will take it to the Little Muddy. No stopping it now. Every bit of Tom's wheat gone."

"Some of it not two weeks from harvest," deadpanned Horace Thompson.

Cromwell glared at the racing flames and braiding pillars of smoke. "How'd it happen?"

Jenny lifted her head. "Tom lit it, Nate."

The soldier turned farmer lifted his chin slightly and frowned a deep inward frown. He'd been feeling Tom's attitude going sour all spring.

"Must have been planning this for a week or more, Nate." Jenny's voice sounded small and wounded, like she was apologizing. "Took every drop of gasoline we had."

"Where is he now?"

"That's the worst of it, Nate." Horace grimaced farmer's joy and turned to face the flames again. "Tom's out there in the middle of it. I get him on the citizen band off and on."

Cromwell dropped his head and muttered a low thoroughly disgusted curse. He looked up at Jenny. Her eyes, pooling with tears, flashed with the reflection of the flames. He reached over and flipped on his CB. "What channel is he on?"

"Good luck," said Peabody putting an arm around Jenny. "We just spent twenty minutes arguing with him. He's got his mind set firm as a fence post."

"What channel, damn it?"

“Thirteen.”

Cromwell keyed the mike. “Breaker one-three, breaker one-three. Tom. This is Cromwell. Talk to me. *Now!* Over.”

The CB buzzed and squawked. A voice broke through the crackle of static. “The war’s just begun, Nate. Clean and load your rifle.”

“What are you talking about, Tom? Get your ass out of there.”

“Just wait,” came sizzling back.

“Come on, Tom, you’re talking crazy.”

Static. Then. “Too late now, Nate.”

“NO! Drive out, Tom. Don’t be a fool. Blow right through those flames.”

“Sorry, Nate. Sorry, Jenny. Speculators ain’t makin’ a dime off me.” The static jumped tenfold ... “Not a dime” ... swelled to a sharp shriek ... then went dead.

Will’s metallic blue jeep rumbled down Route 6 from the north and pulled to a stop alongside the cluster of pickups just as Cromwell slammed down the CB mike. His eyes swung wildly around the group, held a moment on his mother staring at him from the Jeep’s passenger seat like she could see right through him and into the future, then he turned and fixed a long hard stare at the wall of fire burning west like all Hell let loose on the prairie.

## PART I

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# *GRAIN AND GASOLINE*

“When all the various factors for growing grain and raising livestock are included, petrochemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, enriched feed, farm equipment fuel, product transportation, and plastic packaging, the average American family effectively puts more petroleum products in their belly each year than they put in the tank of their car.”

—Forest Mahan, President of the National Grange.



# CHAPTER 1

Thursday, April 9<sup>th</sup>

The New York Financial Times

## THE GLOBAL REPORT

By Linda Bennett

A critical and expensive piece of legislation is working its way through the House of Representatives this week. The Trans-Eurasian Security Act (TES) will authorize a satellite surveillance system and U.S. military protection for the oil and natural gas pipeline currently under construction in Central Asia. By all accounts, this bill seems sure to pass, but I just don't get it. Nearly every major oil field in the world passed peak production three years ago. The age of fossil fuels is on the wane. It's time to move on.

And yet, in the face of global warming, against all the logic of conservation, petroleum usage has impossibly accelerated rather than slowed in the last five years. The construction of the Eurasian pipeline, heavily sponsored by the West's three largest oil companies, is at the heart of this economic blitzkrieg. When complete, twelve thousand miles of petroleum and natural gas pipeline will stretch in all directions like the tentacles of an octopus across the earth's largest land mass and through some of the most dangerous regions of the world.

Whether in reconfigured Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, or the independent Russian states, Islamic extremists have sabotaged the pipeline with bombs and violence with increasing frequency since its inception. As three-quarters of the world's oil will eventually pulse through this pipeline, security for the pipeline's construction has occupied the center of a heated international debate since last winter. The United Nations has firmly resisted sending peacekeeping forces to protect

**what are referred to as “Anglo-American economic interests.” The European Union has steadfastly blocked NATO involvement. And in the Congress of the United States, legislation for funding an increased American military presence in Eurasia will be voted on next week in the House. Think again. Is this really where American taxpayers want to spend their money? Protecting the interests of an industry that is milking the last nickels and dimes out of a literal and metaphoric dinosaur? I don’t think so.**

“Linda, your piece this morning.” *The New York Financial Times* Washington Bureau Chief, Frederick Manning, waited for his prize columnist’s eyes to meet his. “I almost didn’t run it.”

Linda Bennett knew this was coming. “New York?”

Manning nodded.

They were in a tiny café off “M” street in Georgetown, tucked in a quiet back corner, just done with lunch on Thursday afternoon. Linda looked down at her cup of coffee then up at her boss and mentor. There was no one in the business she liked or respected more than Frederick Manning. He was almost sixty. Under six-foot. Attractive if you looked at him long enough. Sensual if you were patient enough to feel it. Exceptionally thoughtful. Poised. Considerate. Kind in every way. But he was old school when it came to running the paper, and he could be blunt.

“Bernstein claims you used the second paragraph in a column last week—and in another two weeks before that. I know that’s an exaggeration, but the point is, he wants you to find another issue.”

Only Manning could have said this to Linda without setting her off. They had talked out her columns many times before. She trusted his opinion and valued his respect. Still her emotions were rising. She took a sip of coffee and breathed in the aroma of Viennese roast to gather herself.

“Tell me, Frederick, what do *you* think is going on with this pipeline security legislation?”

Manning’s look said he wasn’t there to the debate the subject. Linda knew that.

“Humor me,” she said as serious as she could be.

He lifted his eyes to the ceiling, almost comically so. “I think it’s straight up, Linda. The higher the price of petroleum, the more it becomes a terrorist target. As you’ve said in your column, three-quarters of the world’s remaining petroleum will pass through that pipeline.” He shrugged as though there could be no other conclusion. “It needs protection.”

“It’s more than that, Frederick. Look at the history. The reapportionment of Iraq. The destabilization of Iran. The two-faced policy with Saudi Arabia. The military presence throughout the Middle East steadily creeping across Central Asia. Someone’s got an agenda.”

“We’ve been through this before, Linda.”

“But this is what I’m hearing, damn it.” The words hung between them. She hadn’t wanted to curse.

Manning looked at her, his blue eyes as soft as his voice. “Any chance your sources have an agenda too?”

Her sources were the one sore issue between them. She took a deep breath and let it out. “I want to stick with it.”

“Don’t.”

“I want what I write to matter. This legislation is absolute ...” She caught herself this time.

Manning had an easy smile that worked counterpoint to his intent, knowing eyes. He smiled now. “Your column matters only as much as it works,” he replied. “If you overdo it, it turns people off. Your influence goes only as far as your audience will take it. Use a lighter touch and listen to your editors. We don’t need a column every week on the oil industry.”

Linda would have told anyone else to stick it. Instead she backed off. “I hear what you’re saying, Frederick, and I also accept that in many ways you are right.” She paused, uncertain how to proceed. “But I’ve become a different person since my father died. Maybe it’s just that I still have stuff to work out or I’m angry or something, but whatever it is, I’m more determined than ever to take on some of these things that the rest of Washington is so willing to ignore.”

Manning smiled, a gentle, wan smile, letting her go on because she needed to.

“My father was changing in an elemental way in the year before he had the heart attack. I don’t know what he was working on for the Agency—he didn’t bring that home, but in the months before his death, our discussions focused more and more on the management of natural resources, particularly how petroleum depletion would affect the global economy. The economy of everything, he’d say, is based on petroleum. *What happens when we run out?* He asked me this many times, in many different ways, like he was egging me on—*what happens when we run out?*”

Frederick’s eyes reminded her that they had talked this one over before too. “The market allocates resources best,” he said. “Petroleum should be no different. We’ll transition smoothly into other energy sources.”

“But that’s not what we’re seeing. Petroleum *is* different. Price elasticity doesn’t apply. Increasing scarcity is prompting greater profit taking. Instead of conserving

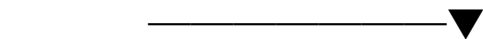
the stuff, we're hurrying to an end. The positioning of U.S. Armed Forces in foreign oil regions is symptomatic of something larger, something that seems so obvious, yet no one wants to talk about it."

Frederick liked Linda a lot. It was a testament to who he was and his real human qualities that he had allowed Linda this moment to make her point when his message was not about content but good journalistic sense and pace. He spoke now as a friend. "I know this last year has been difficult for you, Linda. I've seen it. But the column is not the place to struggle through emotions. What I am saying to you is out of concern and a lot of experience. You're pushing too hard. For my sake, for your sake, give it a break. Find a new bone to worry."

Linda took a breath. *The Times* was not essential to her career. Over a hundred other newspapers nationwide carried her column. She could work anywhere. Frederick knew that. Instead of pointing this out, she said, "Okay," confident she knew things that would get this issue right where it deserved to be—front page, above the fold.

## CHAPTER 2

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Jonathan Mayfield skittered stop-and-go like a hustling midfielder through the Friday mayhem of London's Futures and Options Exchange (FOX). Dancing at a run through this grand electronic bazaar, winding around the trading pits and packs of jabbering brokers, Mayfield shot periodic glances to the banks of overhead monitors, glowing with green encryptions like mission control for the world of trade. Copper here, pork bellies there, rice, wheat, soybeans, coffee beans, crude oil, bonds, currency exchange rates, securities contracts, commodities and financial instruments of all variety were bought and sold a hundred times over in the flash of his eyes.

The twenty-six-year-old Mayfield was a natural born commodities speculator, but he didn't work the trading floor anymore. He'd done his time in the pits, doing the day to day buying and selling, fighting and scrambling for every quarter-point of margin. He was an analyst now. He worked for Linton International and spent most of his time on the third floor of the FOX logged onto Linton's mainframe—determined to make a name for himself—maybe today!

In the last six months, he'd perfected his own customized version of the infamous *Provide* software, allowing him to interface with markets all over the world. He claimed it gave him the largest private commodities and financial market database in the world. And it had become his most important tool. He ran scenarios on it. He'd input imaginary variables, sets of commodities, time tables, quantities of money, harvest dates, shipping routes, weather dynamics, and run them out years in advance, looking for hints or suggestions about how and when to buy or sell futures in this market or that. And this morning he'd struck gold!

A little bit hipster, a lot computer nerd, Jonathan was tall and thin, almost gaunt, with a shaggy mop of dark hair and a bleached blonde chop-pad below his lower lip. Today as he hustled through the FOX, he wore a black suit, a white shirt, no tie, and two small silver rings piercing his right brow.

He nodded to the FOX doorman as he approached the exit. The man smiled and opened the door, offering a tip of his gold-braided cap as Jonathan hit the

gray streets of London, headed at a walking run through a light mist to the Linton Executive Building twenty blocks away.

Though excited and quite anxious, Jonathan tried to stay within his normal hacker/slacker self when he entered the building, nodding and saying a soft hello to fellow employees as he hurried through the lobby and into the elevator. He fretted and shuffled all the way to the thirtieth floor, edging up close to the elevator door in anticipation of its opening. Then there he was. Out the door, standing in the swanky executive suit reception lounge. A moment later, he entered his boss's office about to deliver what he hoped would be the most important pitch of his short career.

"Sit down, please, Jonathan," said Linton's CFO, Louis Hampton, after an energetic handshake and a swell of his usual businessman's vitality. "Now, what's this proposal you're so eager to show me?" Hampton took the chair at his desk. "You mentioned something about grain on the phone."

"I think I've spotted a turn in the market, sir," said Jonathan sitting down across from Hampton.

The CFO's left brow lifted ever so slightly, and he picked a pen off his desk.

"This morning," continued Jonathan, "I ran an analysis of grain shipments since 2005, looking for fluctuations in the yearly patterns. As expected, shipments show a slow but gradual rise with each passing year." He edged up in his seat. "But beginning the second week of May of this year through the end of October, there is a notable jump in the number of grain freighters leased for transport in the eastern portion of the Indian Ocean, around the tip of Malaysia, and into the South China Sea."

Hampton lifted his head with gathering interest. "Go on."

Jonathan drew a written proposal from inside his jacket and placed it on Hampton's desk. "It's more than freighters, sir. Grain elevator leases are maximized in almost all the Pacific Rim ports across this same period of time. It looks like something quite substantial."

Hampton, conservative in manner and dress, picked up the proposal and thumbed through a few pages, then peered thoughtfully at the youth across the desk with two rings in his brow. "What do you think it is?" His tone was serious, cautious.

"I have nothing for certain, sir." Jonathan hesitated a moment. "But it has all the earmarks of a huge orchestrated buy."

Hampton sat back in his chair. He used the pen to scratch idly at his thick brush moustache. "How much grain is involved?"

“Upward of twenty percent of total world exports.” This was Jonathan’s most conservative estimate. He didn’t want to overdo it.

Hampton’s demeanor had changed very subtly since Jonathan sat down. Wheels were turning in his head. As much as Jonathan wanted to impress him, Hampton had men above him he also sought to impress. “That’s billions of dollars, Jonathan.”

“That’s the problem, Mr. Hampton. I’ve run through the financial flows over and over. There’s nothing to tie into the buy.”

“No clue who’s doing it?”

“The elevator leasing is so evenly spread around the Pacific Rim it’s impossible to tell what’s going on.”

“What are the harvest projections for Asia?”

“They won’t be out for another six weeks. There’s nothing pertinent in the Asian press—no alarms, no warnings. The only evidence of anything is the upswing in freighter and elevator leases. Somebody is taking a huge gamble—or knows something no one else does.”

“But you see an opportunity regardless?”

“That’s what brought me in here, Mr. Hampton. Whether it’s a market play or just a growing middle class in Asia, I’d say grain is a great buy right now.”

“Very interesting, Jonathan.” He held the proposal in his left hand. “I will read through this over the weekend. You get back to the computer. Rerun your programs. Double-check, triple-check everything. Work out a buying plan. Get me something more by Monday.”

“Yes, sir.” Jonathan stood to leave, thrilled by the excitement he sensed in his boss.

Hampton stopped him. “Who knows about this, Jonathan?”

“Only the two of us, sir.”

“Keep it that way.”

Jonathan exited the office and walked across the reception area to the elevator. Once inside and the door closed, he balled his right hand into a fist and gave it a hard celebratory pump. “*Yes!*”

Back in his executive office, Hampton punched three numbers into the secure phone on his desk. It was a direct line to the headquarters of Linton’s mother company, Canada’s Andreas Grain. When the secretary in Toronto answered, Hampton went straight to the top. “Curtis LaPalme, please.”

## CHAPTER 3

Seated in the dining room of the historic Nelson Mansion in Newport, Rhode Island, three major players in the prestigious Council of American Policy and their hostess watched the hired help clear the table. The casual talk of the meal was about to give way to a final summation and the reason they had dined together this Saturday evening.

Atossa Andreas-Nelson lived alone in her grand Newport mansion and sat at the head of the table, wearing an all black, high-collared, long-sleeved dress. Her ebony hair was pulled up into a tight bun on top of her head. A black net pinned to her hair veiled her face. She was fifty-seven years old and sole heiress to Canada's Andreas Grain. Her brother-in-law, Frank Nelson, President of American Bank and Chairman of the board of Merit Oil, sat opposite her at the other end of the table. To her right was the wheelchair bound Secretary of Defense, Lawrence Fitzgerald. To her left sat the inveterate Wall Street lawyer, John A. McClay. All three men wore dark conservative suits.

Two tall antique candelabras at either end of the table provided the only light in the vast dining room, shrinking the sense of space to two hovering halos above the expanse of white linen tablecloth. The fragrance of roasted garlic still held from a dinner of steamed prawns, fresh pasta, and chanterelle mushrooms. A Filipino steward entered the dining room with three glasses of liquor on a silver service. The steward circuited the table, ducking into the candlelight, placing an aperitif before each of the men. The young man passed behind Atossa, who didn't drink, and left the room. As the swinging door to the kitchen hushed shut, John McClay turned to Atossa, then Frank Nelson.

"The House will pass our bill next week. It will clear the Senate the week after that." Well into his seventies, McClay had spent thirty years as general counsel to the American oil industry and in the last year had guided lobbying strategy for the Trans-Eurasian Security Act. "The only real uncertainty," McClay paused for emphasis, "is in the White House."

Portly, pear-shaped Frank Nelson, sitting back from the table with a snifter of cognac in his hand, turned to the Secretary of Defense. "Fitz, what chance does our little piece of legislation stand with Kenaghy?" Frank leaned forward over the table with a presiding gravity that seemed to sag off his face in multiple chins and full jowls. "He wouldn't think of vetoing it, would he?"

Fitzgerald had done all the ground work for the Eurasian pipeline as Secretary of State for the previous administration. It was as much his baby as Frank's. The handsome but frail *Skull and Bones* Yalie took a studied sip from his tiny crystal glass of anisette and peered over the top of the aperitif to the firm eyes of John McClay. They'd had this conversation the day before with the Foreign Policy Advisory Board. He lingered over the sweet licorice perfume of his drink, then lowered it to the table with a disturbing precision. "Kenaghy could do anything right now, Frank. As far as I'm concerned, he's a loose cannon. Ever since I leveled with him on the deeper intentions of our foreign policy last fall, he's become harder and harder to talk to. I don't know what he'll do any more." The fingers of his right hand remained on the stem of his glass. He twisted the crystal one way, then the other on the linen tablecloth as he spoke. "He just doesn't seem to understand that all of this is essential to our long-range economic positioning."

McClay turned to Atossa, attentive behind her veil. "I'll talk to the President, Ms. Andreas," McClay said evenly. "Given some time, he'll listen to me."

"Given some time," groaned Frank sitting up straight. "We've been working on this for twenty years. We can't allow some idealistic Democrat to start dragging his feet now. Apparently he has no idea what this is really about. It just peeves me no end that he's become something we have to deal with."

Atossa stared at her brother-in-law from behind her veil. Though she agreed with all he'd said, she thought he was an arrogant ass. She'd married Frank's older brother, Millhouse Nelson, in the 1990s, effectively merging her own significant grain holdings with the Nelson family's American Bank and Merit Petroleum, the oldest and deepest pool of ancestral money and influence in the United States. Millhouse had died almost two years ago. Atossa, still wearing mourning black, now shared control of the entire Andreas-Nelson operation with Frank. There may be no true royalty in the United States, but if there ever was a queen of the world, it was Atossa. "Are you finished, Frank?" she posited with a coldness that made even the old boardroom warrior John McClay shudder.

Frank turned to Atossa with a vacuous smile then took a sip of his cognac. Atossa ignored him and directed a question at McClay. "What will we do if Kenaghy doesn't listen to you, John?"

McClay was private influence incarnate and all business. "Either we'll override his veto or move him out of office next election and wait until after the

administration change to try TES again. It's a delay, but I don't see any other way without undue public theatrics."

Frank compressed his lips to keep from cursing at the lawyer's measured analysis. The Secretary of Defense agreed with McClay. "It's a shame we didn't see this side of Kenaghy four years ago. This last year has been one legislative nightmare after another." He shook his head and spoke softly and downward, as to his after dinner drink. "Why is it so difficult for these elected officials coming to Washington for the first time to accept the fact that they're stepping onto a moving train, not into their own chauffeured limousine?"

"He's a damn fool if you ask me," slammed Frank. "I'm sick of these delays. With a cap on terrorist interruptions, we can go double-time with construction. If we have TES by July, there's still a chance we could have the thing completed by winter."

McClay was firm. "Let me talk to Kenaghy." He lifted his B&B and took a sip. "And if he won't see it our way, his term is over in eight months. We'll be fine."

"For Christ's sake, John, that adds another year. I don't want to wait. If he doesn't listen to you, put pressure on him. Tell him we'll impeach him."

McClay lifted his head indignantly. His eyes swung to Fitzgerald who understood entirely. No one in Washington was very pleased with what they'd endured with the nation's latest selection as President of the United States, but rash action was not the answer. A thick silence held. Atossa suddenly rose from the table. "Gentlemen," she said, "please excuse me." All of them bid her good night. She turned and walked away from the table.

An hour later, Atossa paced back and forth anxiously in her bedroom on the third floor. She'd changed from her black dress to a white silk dressing gown. The distant thud of helicopter rotors chopping at the air brought her distracted pace to a stop. She moved over to the window and peered between the drapes to look out into the night. She watched the Merit Oil helicopter lift off the lighted pad east of the house with her two dinner guests and her brother-in-law. She was glad they were gone and instantly began to relax.

Atossa did not enjoy meetings like the one tonight. Except for the occasional dinner party, Atossa sought little external society and insulated herself from the world in the Nelson Mansion as if it were a twenty-first century harem. Yes, she thrived on the power of her position, and she felt very strongly about her smooth running family grain business, but the oil industry was always ensnared in politics and controversy and caused an excess of emotional duress that she just didn't need.

She turned away from the window and strode across the room to her full-length mirror. Despite her age, she had maintained her physique through a grueling

regime of daily exercise, physical therapy, hormones, and careful eating habits. She opened her robe and let it drop to the floor. She wore nothing beneath. The product of luxurious beauty spas and the world's best cosmetic surgeons, her body resembled that of an athletic thirty-five-year-old woman. She pulled the pins from her bun and shook her hair out around her shoulders. Excessive care, expensive conditioners, and regular dyeing kept it black and lustrous. She studied herself in the mirror, running her hands along the outside of her fine firm thighs and up across her lightly muscled belly, on up to her surgically perfect breasts, massaging them until the nipples stood up.

In contrast to the supple wonder of her body, however, her face was a horror. Half Venezuelan and half Canadian, Atossa had possessed a dark exotic beauty earlier in her life, uncommonly so as a child. Her Venezuelan father fed his massive ego by showing her off to his friends like a piece of artwork to be gazed at or a thoroughbred race horse to watch trot around the track. She had loved the attention then and that sense of stage grew into the core of her being. So much so, that early into her thirties, she began to doctor every little imperfection in her face.

Too many face lifts, too many chin tucks, too many botox injections worked against the natural life and resiliency of her skin. In the last few years, her looks had taken a drastic plunge. The over-worked skin resembled taut, bleached parchment—so thin and stretched her physiognomy appeared etched onto a skull. Grotesque without makeup, merely ugly with it, for almost two years now, since the death of her second husband Millhouse, she wore a veil in public—ostensibly out of grief, but more and more out of a twisted and painful self-consciousness.

Such were the extremes of her looks, her face and her body, the contradiction of it screamed back at her now from the mirror. It gnarled at her erotic moment, and she abruptly turned away from the mirror with a curse.

The walls of Atossa's bedchamber were draped all around with thick crimson velvet. The ceiling was high with a wide skylight in the center angled to the east. A divining table sat below it with a deck of Tarot cards stacked in the center. Atossa crossed the room to the table. Standing beside it, she stared up through the skylight to the stars and a large waxing moon. She thought for a moment about President James Kenaghy. She clenched her left fist and cursed his name and wished him dead—as though the very thought could make it so. Then she forgot all about Kenaghy and the pipeline nonsense. Her thoughts swung back to her face. The name of a cosmetic surgeon, Dr. Nina Colleen, repeated over and over in her mind.

Dr. Colleen was all the rage of late because of a new skin grafting technique, her so-called *face transplant*. There had been a recent magazine article describing this ghastly procedure that initially had only been used in extreme cases of

disfigurement. The face of a just deceased youth is lifted in one piece and fitted to the face of a burn victim or now, for the first time, an aging Hollywood star. For the last week, it was all Atossa could think about. Grain, oil, money be damned. What she really wanted was a face to match her body.

With this idea centered in her mind, Atossa placed a hand on her deck of Tarot cards. She cut to the middle of the deck and turned over the card on the top. *Two of cups*.

"The union of Artemis and Aphrodite," she hushed to herself, then muttered mocking and sarcastic, "Love for me? Ha!"

But Atossa quickly lost her bravado and fell maudlin. "Could I know love again?" she wondered aloud. Memories of those rare moments in her life of deep but fleeting infatuations ran through her mind, followed by a vivid image of her late husband. She looked up through the skylight into the clear night sky, knowing she'd never have another relationship like the one she'd had with Millhouse. She spoke as beseeching whatever furies she believed in. "No, it's not love this card portends," she said with rising hope, "but a union of my face with new skin."

Impulsively she reached again for her Tarot cards and reshuffled the deck. Focusing again on the work of Dr. Nina Colleen and the prospect of a new face, she cut deep into the pile and turned the top card. She glared at the card in her hand. "What kind of joke does the Tarot play on me tonight?"

She stalked back to her mirror and stood before it. She stared at the physical contradiction of herself in reflection. She leaned up close to the mirror surface and ran the edge of the Tarot card across her cheek. There was hardly a wrinkle or a crease on her face, but the skin shone like burn scars, not youth. It was uglier than age. It was a mask with vanity screaming out from behind. "Could anyone really love this?" she asked in a soft disheartened hiss. "Could anyone really care about me?"

Atossa crossed the room to stand beneath the skylight again. She gazed up at the moon, and for a moment, just stood there, basking naked in the moonlight, contemplating this great hole in her life. She had a son with Millhouse. Nineteen-year-old Edmund. She loved him as any mother would her son, but it was not returned. Edmund was aloof and distant. *What could you expect from a spoiled teenager?* And then there was Alise, her thirty-two-year-old daughter from her first marriage. Alise had been such sweet child. There had been a deep unblemished love between them for a while. But of late, that relationship had become strained. Alise had become very critical of her mother and her obsessive ways. Maybe that meant she cared, thought Atossa, shaking her head sadly, knowing that if there were any love in her life, it existed only in this difficult tension between Alise and herself.

She pressed a button on the side of the table, then in disdain for her moment of emotion, sailed the Tarot card in her hand out across the room. A soft knock tapped at a door behind the crimson drapes as the two of cups—the two of hearts in an ordinary deck—fluttered to a landing, face up on her bed. “Come in, Fredrico,” she commanded. A young dark-skinned man parted the drapes and entered the room, wearing nothing but a red thong and a black silk scharf over his eyes.

## CHAPTER 4

Whenever a new politician comes to Washington, one of his or her first epiphanies is the ponderous inertia of the so-called Washington Consensus and the gradual understanding that opinion in the nation's capital is slow to change. The new man or woman may have great and wondrous ideas for the country, but the intellectual bias of the government has grown out of a long tradition dating back to the moguls of the nineteenth century. Powerful banking and aggressive industry are the firm bottom of the U.S. government contract. As James Kenaghy, the forty-fifth President of the United States, entered his fourth year in office, he began to question this tradition, and it had become a major concern to some very influential people in Washington.

Early on in his career as two-term Governor of Massachusetts, James Kenaghy had been tagged a left of center Democrat. To get the presidential nomination, however, he'd toned down his message and made many compromises within his party and to contributors in the business sector. By the time he entered the White House, he seemed just another centrist politician with a modest progressive leaning. Tall and angular with small intense, brown eyes and a thick shock of rapidly graying, brown hair, parted to the right, Kenaghy won people over with his disarmingly open demeanor and clear common sense. When he told stories, he could ease into a convincing Maine drawl and be quite humorous. But beneath this façade of casual charm, he was a complex man with a stubborn intellectual side and a lot more courage than many in the Washington establishment initially realized.

Kenaghy's first two years in office had been reasonably productive, but Congress went Republican in the midterm elections. Things slowed down, and his legislative efforts struggled. The truth is nobody could have done much at that time. It was a period of recovery in the United States. Bad wars and debt had debilitated the nation.

Then late in his third year, Kenaghy had a day of awakening in the Oval Office prompted by a dressing down he'd received from his Secretary of Defense Lawrence Fitzgerald. It amounted to the syndicate of big oil, defense contractors,

and the Pentagon reaffirming the chain of command. It triggered something in Kenaghy. In retrospect some might call it spine, but the American aristocracy labeled it belligerence. And since the New Year, he was looking more like the outspoken governor most thought had been left back in Massachusetts. Washington was displeased and wanted him gone.

A few minutes past noon on Sunday, April 12<sup>th</sup>, President James Kenaghy stood awkwardly at a podium that was a little too short for him, before a small seated gathering in the basement of the West Wing of the White House. A ceremony to present a posthumous Intelligence Star to Dr. Arthur Rivenhouse, a career CIA officer and, in his final years, a deputy director, was coming to an end. The star, as an inscribed plaque, was being awarded for Rivenhouse's career. The plaque would be presented to his family, but would hang in the lobby of CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia.

Because most of what Arthur Rivenhouse had done to distinguish himself remained protected by top-level secrecy clearances, there were no cameras, no tape recorders, no press coverage at all for the ceremony. The gathering was limited to a handful of intelligence people, several high ranking government officials, and two members of the family. Across the front row of chairs sat Kenaghy's National Security Advisor, Don Reed, Chairman of the Senate Armed Forces Committee, Senator Raymond Blount of South Dakota, Rivenhouse's widow, Marianne, and his thirty-one-year-old daughter, *The New York Financial Times* columnist, Linda Bennett. Standing behind and to the left of President Kenaghy was the current CIA Director, Admiral Harry Wendover. And in the very back of the small auditorium, off to one side, was the Wall Street lawyer and oil industry lobbyist, John A. McClay, dressed immaculately in a navy blue suit, a pale blue shirt with a white collar, and a red-striped tie.

"It's a shame," said Kenaghy bringing the memorial statement to a close, "that a man like Arthur Rivenhouse will never be widely recognized for what he contributed to the United States. Those of us here, we knew Arthur, but he was never known publicly. He's been gone a year now, and to the people of this great nation, it is as though a true American hero never existed. Within the intelligence community, however, Arthur Rivenhouse will be forever remembered as the perfect silent patriot, deftly walking the fine line between being a good man and being a good spook."

This last line got crooked smiles from a couple of intelligence men at the back of the room, but for Linda Bennett it hit home. Though her father had been an economist and did his work for the intelligence community in an office, not out in the field with a cover, he had often jokingly referred to himself as a spook, and,

in this emotional setting, Linda couldn't help thinking that her father was now literally a *spook* and that in some way or another, if only as a deep personal memory, his spirit was with her at that moment.

"I don't believe our country has ever known more trying times than this first quarter of the twenty-first century," continued the President, his eyes meeting momentarily with John McClay's in the back corner. "The tragedy of September 11th, 2001 may have changed the lives of Americans forever, but it turned the intelligence world upside down and inside out. Arthur Rivenhouse made his career in this difficult period, fighting an invisible army of terrorists and subversives. He was as instrumental as any man alive for maintaining a sense of security in the land of the free and the home of the brave."

Kenaghy spoke the words someone at Central Intelligence had written for him with feeling and conviction, but the entire time his thoughts were elsewhere. He knew the heavy-hitting lawyer John McClay was not there simply for the ceremony and would want to talk to him afterward. It would be an unpleasant confrontation for the first term President, and he would avoid it if he could.

"Arthur Rivenhouse's wife and daughter are here today," announced Kenaghy, "I would like to present this plaque to them." DCI Wendover handed Kenaghy the plaque. "The Intelligence Star is considered by some to be the second highest award this country can give. I feel that the Intelligence Star for a career is even better than that." Kenaghy turned his eyes to Linda Bennett Rivenhouse. She used her mother's maiden name professionally for reasons related to her father's position in the intelligence community. "Ms. Rivenhouse, would you please accept this award for your father."

Linda rose and stepped forward to take the plaque. There was light applause.

The award surely meant more to Linda than anyone else. She'd had an excellent relationship with her father and had deliberately followed his footsteps into the Washington arena. She'd graduated from Smith in economics, gotten a Masters in Journalism at Columbia, then gone to the Woodrow Wilson School of International Affairs at Princeton for a doctorate. The past three years she'd written her column for *The Times*. She was single, a shade under five-foot five, and as attractive a brunette as she was intelligent.

When she shook the hand of the President, whom she'd met once before, he spoke to her with sincerity. "Linda, I did know your father. He truly was a credit to the intelligence community." He handed her the plaque. "I wish we had a few more like him."

Linda could only say a trembling, "Thank you." Even though her father's heart attack had been over a year ago, she still missed him badly, and the moment suddenly became overwhelmingly emotional. Everyone in the room stood to

applaud as she took the award. Wiping away tears, Linda managed a weak smile then held the plaque out to show her mother.

While others came forward to pay their respects to the family, John McClay, as expected, eased around the back of the group and approached James Kenaghy. McClay offered a smile and extended his hand, "How are you, James?" He was smooth, polite, and full of intention.

Kenaghy took McClay's hand like he was reaching into dark waters. "Fair to middlin'," said the President with the folksy restraint of a New Englander.

"Do you have a few minutes? Allow me to walk you up to the Oval Office."

Kenaghy nodded. He may be the President of the United States, but he'd gradually learned that John McClay carried even more influence than he did. When Kenaghy had first been elected, his friends and advisors directed him to McClay for assistance setting up his cabinet. He'd spent a rainy afternoon at McClay's townhouse in Georgetown, running through names and learning some of the critical dos and don'ts of the Washington establishment. It had been an eye-opening experience for Kenaghy. McClay had been warm, generous, and matter of fact with his advice to the new President. But there had been something quietly forceful in the old lawyer, and it had surprised the stubborn Yankee in Kenaghy how easily he had gone along with several of McClay's suggestions—including his biggest mistake, placing the hawk Lawrence Fitzgerald in the most powerful position in his cabinet. That meeting foreshadowed the entire presidential indoctrination process and the difficult times to come.

During the two and a half months between election and inauguration, when he lived at the Blair House in Washington receiving twice daily briefings, and through the entirety of his first year in the White House, Kenaghy had been impressed with the efficiency and diligence of the career staff people and the bureaucrats that were the unchanging bottom of American governance. During this time, he was gradually initiated to the state secrets and the subtle chain of command that made the system work for the power players in the background, the captains of industry, their bankers, their bureaucratic interpreters, lawyers and lobbyists—the private power behind the public power. Men like McClay.

Kenaghy was all right with this. He was no stranger to politics. Deals were to be cut. Besides, the attention and embrace of Washington politics had a way of making a man feel important. Add the treacherous confidences of the intelligence community, and the whole process made the Massachusetts Governor all the more an insider—even an accomplice to the system that was already up and running when he arrived. But with all this said, tense politics can become personal, and Kenaghy had grown to dislike McClay.

As these two men walked and separated themselves from those who attended the ceremony, the lawyer talked, rambling at first, but gradually working toward a focus and the purpose of his visit. “James, the Trans-Eurasian Security Act is going to be on your desk in less than ten days. It will get two-thirds of the House and a solid majority in the Senate. But there is some concern about your position on this bill.”

They came to a stop in front of the elevator. Neither man reached for the *up* button right away. Kenaghy had already thought long and hard on this one. The politics of the Eurasian pipeline project were at the outer layers of the foreign policy onion long before he had been elected. The situation was complicated by the ethnic complexity of the region and the thick threads of Russian Mafia that remained through all that had changed in what was once the Soviet Union. But it wasn't until Kenaghy was actually in office, during his third major CIA briefing, that he began to understand *how* important this project was to certain parties in the United States. He was told that a hand in Russian oil production was integral to American economic plans and national security. This was reasonable enough to the new President, but the language the intelligence men used in explaining this and the sense of how much of it was already determined alarmed him. When he queried them about the details, he immediately understood his questions were considered naïve and almost humorous to the men. This angered him. But James Kenaghy was a subtle enough man. He kept his indignation to himself.

He felt something of that now, and he wanted to lash out at staid old John McClay, because of late he'd gotten fed up with the institutional presumption of national security, the primacy of the oil industry, and the Pentagon priority over domestic budgetary needs. Instead, however, he stuck to the game. “I'd thought to ask Congress to tack on a rider or two,” he said, looking straight ahead at the elevator doors.

McClay turned to Kenaghy, a bit surprised at this answer, but especially irked by Kenaghy's offhand tone.

“Yes,” said Kenaghy, now reaching for the *up* button. “Those little matters of taxing currency trades and eliminating offshore tax shelters would be the perfect source of revenue for pipeline protection.” Kenaghy had pushed for both of these issues earlier in his term with no success.

McClay felt the sneer in Kenaghy's voice, but he let it go determined to stick to business. “I don't understand, Mr. President.”

Kenaghy faced McClay, looking down on the short stout man. “I just don't believe the American people should pick up the bill for the oil industry.” The elevator doors opened and the President stepped in.

McClay followed. “This is not about the oil industry. It’s about stabilizing Central Asia and securing energy for this country for the next fifty years.”

“Maybe so, but it’s also about the give and take of big business.” Kenaghy pressed the button for the ground floor and turned to McClay. “Wouldn’t it be so much more appropriate for the industry to give up their post office boxes in the Cayman Islands and take on their full tax responsibility? My guess is it would more than pay for the surveillance system and the military presence they’re asking for.”

This was Kenaghy’s new combative side, and McClay hadn’t seen it close up until now. “It doesn’t work that way, Mr. President.” The tone was that of a reprimand.

“Then, yes, Mr. McClay, there should be concern about your bill.” The elevator began to ascend.

McClay tensed, but softened his voice. “James, you must understand that the most important industrialists in the country have sponsored this bill. These are the same people whose contributions put you in office. Their businesses and their capital are the true backbone of this nation.”

“I thought the backbone of the United States was the American people.” Kenaghy’s sarcasm was heavy. He was simply tired of being pushed around.

McClay got this fully and bristled. “The American people will profit heavily from the success of this pipeline.”

“What about the rest of the world, Mr. McClay? How will they profit?”

“What are you talking about? America’s gain is the world’s gain.”

“Really?”

“Let me give you a little economics lesson, Mr. Kenaghy.” McClay’s ire was rising. It spiked in his voice like a lecturing parent. “The value of the dollar used to be based on a gold standard. Many years ago, Richard Nixon took the dollar off gold and floated it on the international market—effectively floating it on petroleum. Let’s call it the black gold standard—petro-dollars. In a word, *oil* is the go in the American economy and has been for a hundred years. Control of oil is the real equity behind the American dollar. It’s called the strongest military force in the world. Stable American dollars are the foundation of the world economy. Our success is the world’s success. This is the most profound economic equation of our time.”

“Not equal tax responsibility?”

The elevator door opened just then, and Kenaghy stepped out. McClay was furious. “Those riders would be a huge mistake, Mr. Kenaghy.” The elevator began to close halfway through McClay’s threat. He stopped the doors with his hand and exited, confronting the President in the hall. “The Democratic National Convention is only seven weeks off.” The sarcastic tone was McClay’s

this time. “You would be wise to rethink your strategy on this legislation.” Then looking around, he noticed the security people and other White House staff in the hall going about their duties.

“Then how about a veto, John?” replied Kenaghy loud enough for anyone to hear.

McClay stood there mouth open as the President turned and walked away.

## CHAPTER 5

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Back in the White House basement, as the last few well-wishers were trailing out of the closed ceremony, a CIA officer by the name of Bob Richards, who'd been sitting in the back row, sidled up to Linda Bennett while she waited for her mother to finish talking to Admiral Wendover.

"It's an important award, Linda," said Richards. A youthful and handsome forty-two, he looked every bit Ivy League CIA.

Linda smiled uncomfortably. Richards was from the generation that followed her father's, and as far as she was concerned, he represented everything that was bad about post 9/11 intelligence work.

"Even if Kenaghy was the man who presented it," he added as though it might be humorous.

Linda tried to be polite. "Please, Mr. Richards, not today."

"Come on, Linda. You can call me Bob." He paused to cast a quick glance around the room. "You have a minute? I have something from Langley for you."

Linda took a deep breath. Her father's position at CIA had garnered a few difficult contacts for her. Richards was the worse, but he was always where the story was and hard to ignore. He put his briefcase on a chair and opened it. He took out a thick manila envelope and handed it to Linda like it was nothing. "Some reading. Might inspire your next few columns?"

"I'll look at it," she said curtly, really very unhappy to have been approached like this in the White House on this day. "I'd best be moving along. I'd like to spend the rest of the afternoon with my mother."

Richards gave her an unwanted hug, dropping his left hand to the curve at the top of her hip in the process, totally infuriating her, then walked away. As Linda stood there trying to collect herself, a friend of her father's, Charlie Patio, touched her on the shoulder from behind. His smile overlaid the sadness that, to Linda, always seemed to be in the eyes of the older intelligence officers.

"Good to see you, Linda." He gave her a real hug.

"And you, Charlie. It's been a while."

"I'm about to get out. Six more months."

"You're never out, Charlie. Once a spook always a spook."

This timeworn line got a little smile from him, but he became serious. "What did Richards say to you?"

"Nothing of importance. He gave me something to read."

Charlie came up closer to her and lowered his voice. "Be careful with those people, Linda."

"Yeah, I know." She looked down at the floor. Charlie touched her arm, and she lifted her eyes.

Charlie caught them full on. "Catch me for a cup of coffee sometime." His tone suggested something more than the words. "You know my number."

"Yes. That would be good."

As Charlie walked away, Linda took a seat in one of the auditorium chairs. Still upset by Richards's gall, she half-heartedly opened the envelope he'd given her and pulled out the sheaf of papers. *The Implications of Climate Change on World Food Supplies* was printed across the title page. She thumbed through a few pages. It was an agricultural report on grain production. She returned the papers to the envelope and went to save her mother from Admiral Wendover.

It was one of those stunning spring afternoons in Washington, D.C. when the cherry trees were in full bloom. Linda took her mother from the suffocating undercurrents of the White House basement out into the fresh air. Together they walked briskly down Seventeenth Street past the Washington Monument, then slowed to stroll and talk beneath the rows of cherry trees along the south edge of the reflecting pool. The ceremony had been a formality; nonetheless, it stirred things in both of them, particularly Marianne.

Within their small family of three, Marianne was the one that felt the most weight from Arthur's profession. He loved intelligence work. Linda was fascinated by it, and Marianne found it stifling and oppressive. Though she rarely said a word about this, the secrets, the secrecy, and the silence underlying everything within their home worked against her, a steady, emotional wearing away.

"Do you still enjoy working in Washington, Linda?" Marianne had asked her daughter this question in various forms many times in the last year. Each time it took Linda longer to answer. "I think it started to get to Arthur toward the end."

They walked twenty or thirty yards to the sound of the weekend tourist traffic before Linda responded. "Mom, I do like it here. Enjoy might not be the right word, but Washington is unique—for better or worse, I suppose. I can't imagine not having the perspective it gives, that feeling of being at the center of the world, the center of the action." She peered up into the pink and white cherry blossoms

overhead, suppressing the frustration these kinds of questions caused in her. “You get addicted to it. You get addicted to being in the know.”

Marianne smiled sadly. “Your father said almost the exact same thing to me once.” They walked on a little further. The air was full of the fragrance of the blossoms.

“I noticed Bob Richards with you today. I didn’t know you still had contact with the Agency.”

“They just give me stuff to read,” said Linda, continuing to walk along, knowing that beneath her mother’s question was the real message.

“Couldn’t that compromise your column?”

“Mom, you know how this works. It’s just the subject they want in the discussion. Yay or nay, they don’t even care what I write. Just open the argument. It’s nothing.” But it wasn’t. Linda was as conflicted about her sources as her mother was. Frederick Manning called it a deal with the devil. Her father called it *everything*.

“Then why do you do it?”

“It gets me a security clearance,” said Linda, hearing the years of ache in her mother’s voice.

“How much does that matter, Linda?” Again the same message behind—*get out, get out, get out*.

“It’s like being in a secret club. It makes me an insider. I can know things others can’t.”

Marianne nodded. “Are you afraid to say *no* to them?”

Linda looked off for a moment, out toward the honking, stinking traffic. “No,” she said, fighting the whole thing, frustrated with her mother and her own tangled feelings. “I’m hoping if I hang around long enough, one day I can get into Dad’s papers. I’d like to know what he was working on at the end.”

Another question appeared in her mother’s face, but it fell away blank.

Linda answered it anyway. “Something was changing in him, Mom. Something in his work was bothering him. I could feel it.”

Marianne’s face remained blank. They walked on without talking, both thinking of Arthur. He had only been fifty-nine. His death was unexpected and sudden. It still hurt. Even worse, there were some questions that hadn’t been asked. Linda had been too emotionally wrought at the time to pursue them. Of late, she’d gotten curious. Maybe she was imagining things. Maybe she was just determined to make it all worse by digging at the scab. But seeing Charlie Patio and the things he’d said had been a prompt. She definitely wanted to talk to him again.

When they reached the east end of the reflecting pool, Marianne broke the spell. “Do you expect to stay with *The Times*, Linda?”

“Of course, Mom. I’ve made it. I’m one of the respected voices in this city. My column is read around the world. It’s possible I’ll be invited to join the Council on American Policy next year. Many people work a lifetime to achieve what I already have.”

They were standing still. The Lincoln Memorial was at their back. The Washington Monument stood directly before them at the opposite end of the long narrow reflecting pool. There was a light breeze. The monument’s image wavered slightly on the water’s surface. Pink petals floated here and there like tiny boats on a mirror. It was as beautiful a setting as there is in the nation’s capital. Mother turned to daughter. “Does that mean you have no interest in raising a family?”

Linda stared at the surface of the pool. “Do you know how many times you’ve asked me that?”

“Any men at all in your life?”

“Men take time, Mom. I’m into solitaire right now.”

“Do you ever talk to Pete?”

“Not really,” said Linda softly, fighting the anger these questions were brewing in her, knowing her mother only wanted her to have a real life—not the kind she’d had. Trailing off Linda added, “Occasionally I get an e-mail.”

Neither of them spoke again for several minutes.

Then Marianne asked again. She would never let go of this. “Is it really worth it, Linda? All the late nights and the pressure.”

Linda was staring off at the five-hundred-foot obelisk, bold against the azure sky and white cumulous clouds. She turned to face her mother’s sad beseeching eyes. Mother and daughter peered into each other. Linda said what worried her mother most. “I’m like Dad, Mom. I like the work. I like the pressure.”

## CHAPTER 6

While the masters of the universe were moving markers around on a board in Washington, out in America's heartland, three men in faded blue jeans, worn work shirts, and baseball caps had gathered at the one fence post all three of their farms shared, and in the laconic farmer way were discussing the most important thing on the face of the earth—topsoil. It was a slow Sunday afternoon, twelve days into April, pretty much smack dab in the center of Kansas, not too far from the ninety-eighth meridian. The winter growing season had been good, and the wheat was two months from harvest. There was reason to be satisfied, but the talk was subdued.

Nathaniel Cromwell was one of these three men. He sat on the fence with his boot heels hooked on the bottom rail. Tom Foster, who'd be dead in ten weeks, leaned heavily on the common fence post, and gray-bearded James Peabody hunkered down on one knee facing the other two. Cromwell was forty-nine years old. Peabody was sixty-two. Foster wouldn't make fifty-one. They were all good friends and had met at this location many times over the years to scratch their heads and work through the problems of running their mid-size family farms—something that seemed to be getting harder and harder with each passing year into the new century.

Tom Foster was having the most difficult time of the three. Cap pulled down tight on his head and so lean he needed to crack a beer to keep his jeans on his hips, he spat on the ground. "This farmin's barely worth it," he said as serious as a thousand acres to plow and harvest. He drew a tin of Copenhagen out of his back pocket and pried off the lid with his thumbnail. Off to the south, the uneven hum of a tractor rumbled in the distance. "Might as well try plantin' seed in this here snoose," he said, pinching a load between a yellowed forefinger and thumb. He stuffed the smokeless tobacco into the side of his mouth so his left eye squeezed shut and the right one widened. He used his palm to wipe a little brown drool off his lip and fixed a combative pop-eyed glare at his grange rep James Peabody.

Peabody reached down and scooped up a handful of dirt at the edge of his property. Fighting the cloudless blue sky glare, he squinted up at his two neighbors through black-rimmed glasses. "This soil," he said, letting it sift like sand through his fingers, "is a lot like Tom here." He allowed a tight grin then flicked his hand, tossing away the rest of the soil. "Stressed and worn out. Nothing but dead dry dirt and petrochemicals. This ain't farmin' anymore, it's chemistry." Peabody was the smallest of the men. The intellectual and the optimist. He wore his hair long in a scraggly ponytail and kept the loose ends out of his face with a red, sweat-stained St. Louis Cardinals' ball cap.

"You know, there is another way to go about this farmin' business," he drawled, looking up at his friends again, a little twinkle in his eyes. Peabody had gone to Kansas State, graduated with a degree in agriculture. He'd experienced the seventies like every college kid did then. Campus politics, marijuana, the Grateful Dead. But he'd followed his dad and settled into forty years of farming.

"Shit-o-dear," moaned Foster. "Not more of that grange hall agricultural science crap." He spit again as in reaction to what Peabody was about to tell them. Tom was fond of saying his education had been at the farmers' school of hard knocks.

Nate Cromwell enjoyed these two men, even ornery old Tom. He'd grown up on this farmland just like they had. But he'd gone off to West Point. While Foster and Peabody stayed home to farm, Nate had a career in the military and attained the rank of Colonel before coming back to farm with his aging father. "Easy there, Tom," he advised playfully, "maybe we ought to be listen' to our book-readin' friend."

"That'll be the day, Nate," spat Tom. "I been farmin' beside this hippie my whole life. He does a lot of talkin'. But when it comes plantin' time, I never seen him do nothin' different than me."

"Now there's where you're wrong, Tom." Peabody absently picked up another handful of soil. "I have a couple experimental fields you've never seen. Might be about time." He grinned like he knew something the other two men didn't.

Tom muttered. "More no-till farming malarkey."

Peabody shook his head. "Give it a chance, Tom."

Nate lifted his green Caterpillar cap and scratched the top of his head like he was stimulating a memory. "Seems to me, my dad talked no-till every now and then."

"Never did any though," said Tom. "I'm sure of that."

"Come on, boys. Take a little walk with me." Peabody stood up, tossing away the dirt in his hand. "I got a field I've been meanin' to show you two."

Tom sucked at his snuff and spat. "I got work to do."

Nate let out a little chuckle and dropped down off the fence. Not so tall as square, he looked kind of dangerous the way his thick arms hung half-cocked at his side. But his face gave him away. Clear blue eyes the color of the sky and a farmer's slow easy smile. Even laid over eight years of worse-than-hell Special Forces combat experience, Nate glowed with a cowboy confidence and country boy honesty. There was something else though. An unnamable element. Something immediately felt, but indescribable in parts and pieces, that gave wonderful force and fire to anything Nate said or did.

"Let's go, Tom," he said, no push, no shove, and stubborn Tom Foster mumbled something, then bent down and slipped between the fence rails with all the grunts and groans of a working man fighting the process of aging.

Peabody led his two neighbors down the fence line between his farm and Nate's about fifty yards. A big old crow sat on one of the fence posts watching them approach. It squawked and flew off as the men took a right between a couple of empty plots ready for corn.

Peabody kept talking. "I know neither of you pays much attention to what goes on at the grange. But if you ever get the notion, Nate—check it out. It's way too late for me to worry about Tom here."

"You got that right," grumbled Tom, dragging along behind Nate, barely within earshot.

"Look at the website," pushed Peabody. "The National President, a fellow by the name of Forest Mahan, writes a weekly column. Gets into some interesting stuff."

"Like makin' farmin' pay," sneered cheery Tom Foster.

"Like fighting erosion. Cutting down on our dependency on chemicals. Even some ways to get more mileage out of our water."

"Water, now there's my problem in a word," said Nate. "Seems like I'm pumping more water every year just to get the same results."

"It's gettin' hotter all across the U.S., Nate. I'm not sure if the climate's changing or what, but I know what I see happenin' day to day. I'm planting my corn almost three weeks ahead of when my daddy used to."

"Climate change, my ass," called out Tom from behind. "No way to know that kind of stuff—unless you been around ten thousand years. We've just had a long spell of warm weather."

Peabody kept walking, talking over his shoulder. "One way or another, Nate, the moisture content of this soil's been on a steady decline for quite some time. This Mahan, he's my brother-in-law's neighbor in Missouri, hardly ever spends any time at the grange office in Washington. Runs everything out of his home, so

he can keep at the farm. He's been tracking moisture content for thirty years. Says it's down by half—less than fifteen percent right now.”

“He makin' any money?”

“Hell, Tom, as far as I can tell he's the most successful farmer I know. Grows six or seven different crops, even does a fair bit of organic farming.” Peabody took another right turn, along a row of chest high winter wheat.

“Right here, fellas.” He stopped at the edge of a large plot, clearly segregated from the other fields. He put his hands on his hips and stood back, belly foremost, like a proud father. “Now how's this wheat look to you boys?”

Nate responded first. “Well, James, doesn't really look that much different than what I'm growing.”

“Yeah,” followed Tom, “except this is the damn trashiest field I ever took a look at. When's the last time you cleaned up the stubble, ran a disk through here?”

“Reach down and try some of that soil.”

Nate knelt down, pushed the debris of stubble and organic matter away from the base of the thick green stalks, and dug his fingers into the dirt. “Seems quite moist,” he said over his shoulder as he scooped up a handful. Tom came up close, and Peabody leaned in between them as Nate, still on one knee, prodded the fresh, dark dirt with his forefinger.

“Nothin' like that dead dirt I showed you out there by the fence post.”

Tom looked skeptical. Nate sniffed at the dirt in his hand and slipped back within himself. Being in the fields, smelling the ripe wheat, smelling the soil. How different this was from the military and the life he used to live—before the ugly discharge ...

*A big black chopper winds its way along the Hindu Kush Karakoram Range up over the eastern Afghanistan border north of the Kyber Pass into the White Mountains and some of the most austere country in the world. The U.S. Army special operations MH-47E helicopter left Peshwar, Pakistan at nineteen hundred hours, disappearing into the black Eurasian night with a crew of three and a payload of seven, their destination an Al Qaeda cave fortress ten miles to the northeast of Tora Bora.*

*Lieutenant Colonel Nathaniel Cromwell, U.S. Army Special Forces, kneeling between the pilot and copilot, looks back over his shoulder into the shadowy bowels of the big chopper. Somebody strikes a match and lights a cigarette, illuminating for an instant the glistening faces of his people, six battle-experienced “irregulars,” as he calls them. A handpicked mix of Army Rangers and local intelligence. The 400-mile round trip by helicopter into the mountains and back at this time of year is dangerous enough*

*for the weather and the dark, but add to that their mission, and all you got from this group was dead silence or gallows humor.*

*Cromwell turns back to the instrument panel in front of him. In the center, a direct feed from a reconnaissance satellite two hundred miles overhead glows green on the pilot's IAS (Integrated Avionics System) monitor. A little red dot on the satellite map tracks their position relative to the ground. They've been in the air more than two hours now, and when the sweet smell of freshly lit tobacco finally weaves its way up through the fuselage to the cockpit, Cromwell breathes it in as welcome relief to the prevailing metallic staleness of grease and diesel.*

*"Check it out, Colonel," calls out the copilot over the blistering rotor noise, handing him a set of ANVIS-7 night vision binoculars. "You've been down there," continues the young man, "what do you make of those dark spots inside that canyon, sir?"*

*Cromwell lifts the binoculars to his eyes, then focuses out the window in the direction they are headed. Yeah, he's been down in these mountains. Spent a year and a half down there as an in-field advisor to the Hezbi-i Islami Guerillas. That was one crack unit of dangerous and brutal sons-of-bitches. He'd seen them do things to prisoners he still couldn't talk about. Back then he'd figured no one could ever take those people at their own game.*

*The savage Pushtan tribes had controlled these highlands for a thousand years. The English tried to rout them out for fifty years in the 1800s. Even armed one set of tribes to combat another, only succeeding in arming them all. A century later, the Russians could do no better. Long ago it was smooth barreled rifles, then German-made carbines, now it was hand-held missiles from China, Kalashnikov AK-47s from Russia, and all sorts of wonderful electronic shit delivered through Pakistan's Inter-Service Intelligence as a gift from the CIA. Fuck, for all they knew, they'd be shot out of the air by ordinance made in the good old USA before they even entered the warren of caves and Al Qaeda hideouts they were looking for. Three MH-47Es had already met such a fate before winter hit. But for the first time in this strange damn war, they had a real lead. If it wasn't the Bin Daddy, it was one of his chieftains.*

*"I think that's the spot all right, Lieutenant," growls Cromwell, lowering the binoculars. "Get this thing down low and slip in as close as you dare."*

*The pilot grins at Cromwell. "Your boys got snowboards, Colonel." He pushes forward on the joystick and the chopper dives straight down. "We'll just drop you out of mid-air and you can shred on in." He yanks the stick to the left. The chopper swings radically sideways, prompting groans and curses from the people in the rear, then cuts a wide arc around a vicious looking crag. A gust from the east buffets them just before they drop below the rocks, and the chopper sways within feet of the ravine wall.*

*"FUCK THIS ROLLACOASTER!" screams from the rear.*

*Cromwell grips at the seats on either side of him, holding himself upright, looking from the ground to the screen and back.*

*“Zoom that thing in again, LT,” he calls out getting more and more into the hunt. “Is it possible to see something the size of a man?”*

*The copilot bangs at the keys and triples resolution. Three dark hollows are aligned along the east wall of the canyon just as intelligence described. “At night, I doubt it, sir. We’ve been watching this location for eight days and haven’t spotted anything conclusive yet—shadows and weather make this a hard place to see from outer space.”*

*“Yeah, yeah, don’t matter, I guess. This is the place we’re supposed to check out. Any closer and they’ll know we’re here. Set her down, cowboy,” he says to the pilot, then to the copilot. “Map it, Lieutenant.”*

*“Gotcha, Captain Kirk.” The pilot pulls back on the stick, and the chopper heels over to the left in a sharp, sudden turn.*

*“There goes lunch!” comes screaming up from the back.*

*“Easy back there, Rusty. This carnival ride’s just gettin’ good,” throws back Cromwell, grinning through clenched teeth. Yeah, he thought he had some guts until he’d fought with those tribesmen. Man, they had that Jihad thing going for ‘em. They go into battle thinking there’s no better way to die than for Allah. Couldn’t believe he’d come back for a second try in these godforsaken mountains. Probably be digging out some of the same guerillas he fought with ten years ago. There was more than a little irony here if you had the cynicism to dredge it up. Best not to think about it. Best not to think at all ...*

Nate let the soil fall through his hand. He poked two fingers into the base of a nearby wheat stalk, then pulled it out clear to the roots. He studied it up close and breathed in the thick scent. He dug a finger into it and picked out a fat worm. “Plant looks just as healthy as this night crawler, James, roots, soil, and all.”

Tom Foster pinched off a wheat tassel and twirled it between his fingers. “Nice and full here too, Jimmy. What’s so special except that you forgot to weed this plot?”

“Them weeds and debris slow evaporation, Tom. Hell, Mahan says a season of no-till’s worth two inches of soaking rain.” Peabody grinned. “I haven’t taken a plow or disk to this field in five years. Water it half as much as the other fields. Cut way down on herbicides and pesticides. Don’t use much fertilizer at all. Got about a quarter the hours into this acre as I would with conventional cultivation.”

“Bullshit Peabody. What kind of crap you tryin’ to sell us? What’s the yield been?”

“Look for yourself, Tom. Started slow enough, but each year the yield’s been a little better. This year. You can see it. Equal to any other acre I got out here—for a lot less money and lots less work.”

Nate looked up from his kneeling position, worm still twisting in his fingers. “What’s your secret?”

“An investment of time, Nate. Four, five years of a different kind of soil management. That’s what it is.” Peabody knelt beside his friend and watched him put the worm back into the ground. “I harvested my last crop of conventionally cultivated wheat in this field five years ago. I left all the stubble and residue in the field. Planted corn right into it with a chisel plow. Once the shoots began to appear. I threw on some heavy doses of herbicide. Later on I sprayed the field with Furdan for the insects. I double-cropped every year. Starting with two years of corn, then alternated with soybeans, barley, and then this here wheat. No secret. Just been following a formula. You can get all this off the grange website.”

“But you’re using lots of chemicals?”

“Only at first, Nate. Smart crop rotation is everything. I discovered with each year, as the soil gets healthier, the plants get stronger. I need less chemicals. Plants can fight off the weeds. Fight off the insects too. It’s not that much different than what the Amish do in Pennsylvania. And they got some of the most beautiful farms in the world.”

“And the downside is?”

“It took all those five years to get going, Tom. And a shit-load of chemicals early on. This is my first competitive harvest. I couldn’t have done this to my whole farm all at once. I would have had too many years of low return. There’s no quick or cheap changeover from an established conventional farm. It takes time and money.”

“Great,” groaned Tom. “Meaning if you’re running close to the line like most of us, you’ll never have the chance to make the switch.”

Peabody shrugged. “Hey, at least there’s a way. And what I did here isn’t really the best way for farming in Kansas. Ridge-till is what Mahan preaches. It’s not no-till, but reduced till. In any case, it’s conserving the soil.”

“A new farming guru, eh?” Tom just didn’t want to hear about change.

“Ain’t new, Tom. You know as well as I do, conservation tillage’s been around longer than you or I. Mahan’s just another farmer. Did some research and took some chances. Last five years he’s been remaking the grange. He’s always saying the farmer’s best friend is another farmer. Why not get together a little bit? Tighten up the community.”

“Shit-o-dear, Peabody, you sound like some kind of evangelist. I got to get back to my failing farm before you break out a Bible or something.” Contentious

and pissed-off as he always was, Tom turned away abruptly and stomped out of the field.

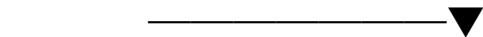
Nate looked at Peabody and shook his head. “Nobody’s going to change how Tom Foster does things.” Then he smiled. “Interesting stuff though, James. Thanks for the lecture. I don’t know if I’m quite ready for all this, but I got to say I’d be a fool for not looking into it a bit more.”

“Well, I’m not that far ahead of you, Nate. I did a little experimenting with a couple acres here and there. I have close to two thousand more of the industrial style. I’m not even sure what I’m going to do—though I am preachin’ it. Appreciate your listenin’.”

“Not a problem,” said Nate, turning to watch his old buddy Tom pass out of sight at the edge of the field. “And you know, regardless of how Tom moans,” he looked back at Peabody, “we all got a decent crop this year. I still figure I can make a nickel—but not if I don’t get my ass back to work. As you say, corn’s going in earlier every year.”

## CHAPTER 7

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Jonathan Mayfield sat in one of the two chairs in front of Louis Hampton's desk. It was nine-fifteen Monday morning. He'd just given Hampton his proposal. He was both excited and nervous as Hampton turned the pages and scanned the report, quickly working his way to the back and the most important numbers.

Jonathan had spent the entire weekend preparing this buying plan. He'd determined that what was happening was much more substantial than he'd first believed. Over a three-month period nearly a third of the world's exportable grain would be stored in elevators in Bangkok, Jakarta, Singapore, Manila, Saigon, Da Nang, and forty smaller cities around the Pacific Rim. Going back thirty years, never had more than six percent been stored in these ports at one time. Somebody was up to something.

And if it was what Jonathan envisioned, it would be the largest grain buy he'd ever heard of—over a hundred million tons—even more fantastic in impact than when the notorious Hunt brothers tried to corner the soybean market in the late 1970s. That had been a horrible fiasco and had ended with an unsolved murder. But no one could corner the grain market—and yet, with the kind of insight Jonathan now had, smart buying by Linton International would put them in a position of tremendous, almost immoral market leverage. If he wasn't badly mistaken, this proposal, this buying schedule, was going to knock the socks off his boss and be the real red-letter starting point of his career.

Hampton folded over the last page, laid the proposal on his desk, and sat back in his chair with his arms crossed. "This is very nice, Mayfield." His tone hinted of displeasure.

Jonathan couldn't believe it. "Thank you, sir." He cleared his throat in an effort to disguise his dismay. "Implementation should begin immediately."

Hampton just stared at him.

“Of course,” continued Jonathan, fumbling to find himself, “it will be critical to keep a close eye on the grain market. Everything is based on a buying pattern to fill those freighters and elevators—and that hasn’t begun yet.”

Hampton maintained his stare.

Jonathan squirmed beneath his boss’s heavy eye. “Is there something wrong, Mr. Hampton?”

Hampton uncrossed his arms. “I thought we had something a bit bigger than this, Mayfield,” he said with genuine disappointment, seemingly as much for his own expectations as in Jonathan’s effort. “This is a decent little proposal. But I must say your earlier description led me to believe we had a much more significant play in the works. Something really hot. Not this conservative little buy and sell schedule.” Hampton placed both his hands on the desk and leaned forward into Jonathan’s pierced face and punctured confidence. “I think you can do better than this, Jonathan. *Much better.*”

Jonathan shifted in his seat. “That is true,” he confessed. “It’s possible to take a larger piece of the market, Mr. Hampton, but,” he sighed, “it is the grain market, sir. Our presence will affect prices worldwide, and, well, the low end of the market depends on grain to survive. I felt it would be better for all involved to be moderate. Bigger might be better, but more obvious. There could be adverse publicity if we make too much of an impact on the market. That was the idea behind this plan. Just like our mystery buyers in the Pacific Rim, I have tried to spread our buy out so evenly around the world and with so many traders that Linton’s presence is completely invisible. That’s—that’s what’s so beautiful about it. We can make a lot of money and not be held accountable when the price of grain doubles—which, in my opinion, will happen before the first of June.”

Hampton lowered his eyes and slowly dragged his index finger down the proposal’s cover page. “How often,” he asked, lifting his eyes, doubling his intensity, “does a commodities trader get the kind of opportunity your projection forecasts? Once, twice in a lifetime? Our business is about profit, not social conscience. My guess is we could double or triple your buying increments and still remain safely beneath the shadow of this other operator.”

Jonathan’s right hand went to his mouth. He squeezed his lower lip between his forefinger and thumb.

Hampton smiled aggressively, man to boy. “Jonathan, you know computers inside out. And you have as good a mind for the market as anyone. But you are young, and there are some difficult lessons that are not trends or gigabytes. I know you will get over this little moment of compassion.” Deeper motives angled across Hampton’s brow. “Linton has many important clients. We owe it to those clients to make as much on their investments as we possibly can. We really do.”

He lifted the proposal from his desk. “I want you to go back to your office. And I want you to revise this. I want you to crank it up and wind it out so tight it stinks of money. I want you to think like a business man, not Mother Teresa.”

Jonathan nodded uneasily and stood. “I will do my best, sir,” was all he could make himself say walking backwards out the door.

“Tomorrow,” said Hampton with a big over done smile. “Same time.”

Jonathan rode the elevator down to the ground floor in abject silence. He felt both pressured and stupid. Head down, he exited the building into another gray London morning and headed dejectedly back to the FOX. A few blocks from the Linton Executive Building, a black Mercedes limousine with tinted windows all around pulled up along the sidewalk ahead of Jonathan. The rear door opened, and an older woman with a scarf over her head struggled painfully out of the car. The woman was just clear of the door when she dropped her purse. Jonathan, who’d lifted his head long enough to watch this happen, took two quick steps to retrieve the woman’s purse. As soon as he bent down, two strong hands from inside the Mercedes took hold of his shoulders and, with an assist from the woman behind, yanked him off the street into the car. Jonathan was thrown to the floor of the car as the door slammed shut and the big black vehicle accelerated away from the curb into the morning traffic.

Inside the limo, two sets of hands pinned Jonathan down. He twisted around, flailing at the air, knocking the hair off the supposed woman—noting she was an Asian man, just as a chemical soaked cloth pressed into his face and consciousness dissolved.