

THE ESKIMO

Part One

By Fritz Pettyjohn

There is no pre-established harmony between the promotion of truth and the welfare of mankind. - Friedrich Nietzsche

PREFACE

In the presidential election three months ago no candidate won a majority of the electoral vote. The independent Tea Party candidate, Texas Senator Coke McNamara, won a plurality, followed by incumbent Democrat Ferdinand Lachey. The Republican, New York Governor Brian Downey, finished third. The House of Representatives, voting by state, has until January 20 to decide a winner.

The Vice Presidency will be decided by the Senate, but only between the top two electoral vote winners, Tea Party candidate Alaska Senator Bud Mercurieff, and incumbent Democrat Lem Tarpley. The third place Republican, Wyoming Representative Joanna Kreuger, is ineligible.

The Senate has 52 Republicans and 48 Democrats. The House has 220 Democrats, 204 Republicans, and 11 Tea Party independents.

The District of Columbia has filed suit, seeking a court order requiring the House to allow it a vote in the selection of the President. The Speaker of the House, Democrat Bob Moore, has agreed to delay voting until the Supreme Court issues a ruling.

Thursday, January 4th

The grand ballroom of Washington's premier hotel was the scene of political season's first, and most extravagant, reception and buffet. The powerful lobbying firm of Klein and Connelly sponsored the event to welcome Congress back to Washington. Much of the room was taken up by an elaborate buffet, featuring a large variety of the most expensive delicacies. The four corners of the room featured open bars, with every type of alcoholic beverage. An eight piece band was at one end of the hall, behind a spacious dance floor, playing light rock and show tunes.

Senator Bud Mercurieff, Republican of Alaska, was accompanied by two Secret Service agents, Wilson and Brennan. As they entered the room he said, "You guys have got to have

some of the prime rib. It's amazing, melts in your mouth, practically. I don't know how they do it."

Brennan shook his head. "We can't do that, Senator."

"Oh, well. Sorry about that. Anyway, I plan on being here around twenty minutes, then we'll head upstairs."

In suites on the upper floors of the hotel scores of Senators and Representatives were hosting fundraisers. Even though the session of Congress was only a day old, and the next election almost two years away, the never ending demand for campaign cash meant there was never an off season for raising it. Washington D. C. was a money culture, where the size of a campaign account was a measure of political strength. The political class analyzed a Congressman's quarterly campaign finance reports the way baseball fans checked a player's batting average and RBI's. While some members limited their fundraising activities to no more than four hours a day, most spent a majority of their time pursuing donations.

Mercurieff would attend a dozen or more of these functions tonight, as a favor to the hosting member. It would be grip, grin, and go; just a few minutes at each, being introduced to major donors, demonstrating to them the importance of the host.

Bud stood for a moment on the steps leading down to the ballroom, surveying the familiar scene. The room was packed, as always, and the dance floor was filling up. One reason for the event's popularity was the invitations each member of Congress was allowed to distribute to their staff. These were highly prized, and the enthusiastic young staffers added some gaiety that was lacking at more restricted functions. But it was different, this year. The upcoming vote in the House, to decide the outcome of the Presidential election, overshadowed everything in Washington. The crowd was subdued, and there was a palpable tension in the air.

Bud went to the line for the prime rib, nodding greetings along the way, and soon had a heaping pile of the rarest cut, which he spread on soft rolls, garnished lightly with creamy horseradish. He ordered a beer from a passing waiter and was just about to take his first bite when a tall, slender man with pale blue eyes shoved his hand out toward him. "Senator Mercurieff! Bud Mercurieff!"

Bud recognized him after a moment, set his plate down, and shook hands with freshman Senator Johnny Sackett, Democrat of Kentucky. "Pleased to meet you, Senator. Congratulations on your election, and welcome to Washington."

"Thanks, thank you. Yes, it was close, but we pulled it off. I've never run statewide before, but I did have that name I. D. from my dad, who was governor twenty years ago. I was

outspent, three to two, and without that name I. D. I don't know if I'd have made it. You know, I'm only 41 years old, so you're no longer the youngest member of the Senate, Bud"

As Sackett spoke he glanced around the room, to see if people were looking at him. With his right hand on his hip and his upper body leaning far to the right he had the rakish pose of a sailor. Mercurieff did not respond immediately, so he carried on.

"I got into politics young, started young, you know. I ran for city council when I was still in college, and by God if I didn't get elected!" Sackett rambled on about his career, family, and political philosophy. Bud looked longingly at his plate of prime rib. It would be bad manners to feed himself while Sackett was speaking to him, but he was tempted. He grit his teeth as he imagined the warm pearly morsels of hot fat encased in the meat as they cooled and solidified into cold blubber. Three minutes later Sackett was explaining that he would not be able to give Mercurieff his Senate vote for Vice President. "I'm a Democrat, Bud, my daddy was a Democrat, and my granddaddy was a Democrat."

"What if your daddy was a jackass, and your granddaddy was a jackass. Then what would you be?"

"What? What do you mean by that?"

"It's a joke, Johnny, an old Washington joke. You're supposed to say, 'Well, then, in that case I guess I'd be a Republican'"

Bob Moore, the Speaker of the House, was holding forth to an entourage twenty feet behind Sackett. Mercurieff waved to him and caught his eye.

"You know Speaker Moore, Johnny?"

"No, I don't."

"Well, it seems he wants to meet you. He's been waving at us, trying to get your attention."

Moore growled to his companions, "What the hell is Mercurieff doing, waving at me?"

As Sackett turned around he saw Moore waving back at Bud half-heartedly.

"The Speaker of the House is a mighty powerful man in this town, Johnny. You better go say hello."

"You bet I will!" He walked briskly over to the scowling Moore, a great shit eating grin on his face.

As Bud picked up his plate he turned to Agent Wilson and said, "I like to introduce people around, you know, people new to town."

Wilson was black, and utterly humorless, but he couldn't help but smile, his large white teeth contrasting with his chocolate skin. "Nicely done, Senator," he said softly.

Mercurieff wolfed down his food, washed it down with beer, and said hello to the passing Senator Barbie Bachman, Democrat of California. Bachman compensated for her small stature with an aggressive, even pugnacious attitude. This effort was undermined, though, by her unvarying facial expression – eyes wide open, giving her a startled look, the result of a series of plastic surgeries. "Bud," she muttered as she walked by.

As Mercurieff finished his food he spotted Grussendorf, Majority Whip in the House, helping himself to hors d'oeuvres. He turned to Wilson, and said, "You see that guy in the grey suit over there, next to the redhead?"

"Yeah, I see him."

"He's Grussendorf, the number three Democrat in the House. I think you should keep an eye on him."

"Will do," said Wilson, skeptically.

Bud looked closely around the room. He would need 51 votes to be elected Vice President, and there were several Senators he hoped to talk to tonight. He spotted one of his targets in the middle of the room – Senator Joe Binkley of Rhode Island. Binkley was a RINO – Republican in name only. His highly liberal views almost cost him the chair of the Appropriations Committee two years ago, but the power of seniority prevailed. Almost all members of Congress, by definition successful politicians, are publicly amiable to some degree, since likability is a key to electability in American politics. Binkley was a stark exception, as irascible in public as many Senators were in private. His ascension to the chairmanship of Appropriations only encouraged his belligerence. The numerous public works projects he was able to secure for his state made him politically invulnerable.

As Mercurieff approached Binkley he was talking with Lanny Klein, one of the evening's hosts. He edged his way in to the conversation, saying "Evening, gentlemen."

They greeted him in turn, and Klein said, "Senator, welcome, welcome. I'd like to talk to you tonight, if that's possible."

"Sure, Lanny. For sure. Joe, I wonder if I could have a word with you."

"I suppose," said Binkley. They stepped a few paces away, and Klein drifted off. Binkley was an enormous man, almost 300 pounds, and half a head taller than Mercurieff. He was quite pale, with bland grey eyes and a few white hairs combed across the top of his bald skull. His most prominent features were his lips, large and liverish, in a constant pout of disapproval.

"I'd like to know if I can count on your vote, for Vice President."

Binkley looked down on him, making no attempt to disguise his hostility. "Ah yes, my vote." He stared at Bud coldly for a few moments. "If Lachey is reelected I will vote to give him his running mate, Tarpley."

"And if Lachey doesn't win?"

Binkley looked away, glancing slowly around the room. He hated doing anything for Bud Mercurieff, but he had no real justification or excuse for voting against him. "Then I would have to vote for you."

"I appreciate that, Joe. And I know you're a man of your word. Thanks." He motioned to Klein, who came over hurriedly.

"Great show, Lanny, as always. You always come through."

"That's what we're here for, Senator. I'm pleased you could stop by. I do have something to discuss, in the business line."

"O. K."

Klein guided Bud to an open space in the center of the room, where their conversation could be more easily observed. He looked from side to side, as though to assure himself they would not be overheard; in reality to make sure the crowd had a chance to see him with Mercurieff. He leaned close to Bud, his mouth a few inches from his ear. "As you know, I'm very close to the Israeli ambassador. He asked me to talk to you, in confidence, about the election in the House. They're very concerned."

"They should be. McNamara's had a number of private talks with the Prime Minister. I think I understand their position. They prefer McNamara, but could live with Downey. Lachey they can't abide."

"Precisely. The ambassador wants to know, can McNamara possibly prevail? Conventional wisdom says no, that it's between Downey and Lachey."

"Tell him this, from me. We've got a shot at this. We could win it. We're not asking for their help. We are asking that they don't do anything to help Downey. We'd be very upset at that."

"Understood, understood, Bud. I'll pass it along."

"I'd best move on. Good talking to you, Lanny."

"Always a pleasure, Senator."

Bud carefully scanned the room, looking for the other two weakest links in the Republican Senate Majority, Inadomi of Hawaii and Jared of Vermont. Seeing neither, he pulled a paper from inside his suit coat, a list of hotel suites, in order of priority. He motioned Wilson over to his side. "You pick up anything on Grussendorf?"

"He's got one coat pocket full of wontons, another one full of lobster rolls."

Bud chuckled and shook his head. "He just hates to see good food go to waste. Probably the way he was raised. We're going upstairs. We'll start with my dear Leader, the formidable Mr. Yardley, the lion of Ohio. Room 422." Wilson motioned to Brennan, and they were off.

Friday, January 5th

Fred Katz checked the display of calls waiting. Eight of the ten were listeners critical of his just concluded interview with the newly elected Speaker of the House, Bob Moore, Democrat of Illinois. Turning to Gil Grossberg, his board operator, he asked, "Time?"

"Sixty seconds."

In a minute the 620 radio stations carrying his program would put him back on the air. He was also simulcast on a cable TV network, and his TV monitor showed they were finished with commercials and had resumed the television broadcast of his show. For the next minute the show would be on television, but not on radio. To his newsman and sidekick, Tony Aranzubia, seated a yard away, he said, "People didn't care much for that interview."

"Hard to tell. One of the worst ever. He didn't answer one question you asked."

Katz put on his earphones and looked at his image on his television screen. While he routinely downplayed the significance of his television audience, dwarfed as it was by his

radio listeners, he was always aware of his appearance, and the camera's eye. To Sundance, his call screener, he asked, "Any of these calls any good?"

"Mike from Milwaukee might be O. K., on line four. Sounds kinda feisty."

At 5:22 sharp he said, "It is twenty-two minutes past the hour, and, you're right, it's the Katman and crew. If you're just tuning in you missed our little chat with the Speaker of the House. A very fine interview, if I do say so myself."

The crew chimed in. "The Katman at the top of his game."

"Brilliant."

"Tough. Tough, but fair."

"Fair, yes," said Aranzubia. "At the same time, no holds barred. A bravura performance, Kat. An award winner."

"Let's see what Mike from Milwaukee thinks," said Kat, punching the button for line four. "Mike, you're on the air."

"Katman! This is Mike, from Milwaukee."

"I know that, meathead. Why're you calling?"

"That interview you just did, with Speaker Moore. It sucked."

"Sucked? Are you crazy? What's the matter with you? Are you drunk?"

"It sucked, Katman. You'd ask him a simple question, like about how they're going to count the votes the way they are, and he never answered. And then you'd just ask him another question, and he'd blow you off again. It was awful."

"Mike?"

"Yes."

"Eat me," said Kat, extending his clenched fist in the air, signaling Grossberg to "bomb" the caller with the sound of a huge explosion. Cocking back his head, he looked defiantly at Aranzubia.

"Was that necessary?" asked Aranzubia. "Eat me?"

"He insulted me," said Kat. "He said I sucked. I can't put up with that."

"He actually may have had a point."

"What?"

"Now that I think of it, the Speaker never did actually answer your questions."

"He didn't? Gil, Kid?"

"Not really," said Grossberg.

"Not at all," said Sundance.

"You know, you're right, damn it. These politicians are all the same. And I'm tired of it. They're not getting away with it any more, not on this show."

"That ends today," said Sundance.

"No more!" exclaimed Grossberg.

"These sons of bitches come on this show, they try and duck a question, they're gonna get hammered!" said Kat, his voice rising.

"No more Mr. nice guy," said Aranzubia.

"Bring me a politician," shouted Kat. "Right now! I'll tear into 'em. I'll show 'em. Who can we get, right away? I know. Kid, get ahold of the Eskimo. Call him up, right now."

"Right away," said Sundance.

"The Eskimo" was Senator Bud Merculieff, Kat's particular friend and occasional hunting companion. Kat's frequent demands to "get that damned Eskimo on the phone" were a running gag, and Sundance ignored Kat's instructions.

"And maybe the Eskimo can explain what the hell's going on in the House of Representatives," said Kat. "I spent ten minutes talking to the Speaker – that fat bastard – and I haven't got a clue."

"The Eskimo knows," said Sundance.

"I'm sure he doesn't," said Kat. "Right, Zube?"

"As a matter of fact," said Aranzubia, "I'll bet he does."

Speaker Moore had never been a guest before, and in a fit of pique the Katman decided he never would be again. After announcing the Speaker was banned for life, Kat and his gang of three spent the next several minutes berating and belittling Moore in the most personal and offensive terms. Particular attention went to his hairdo. Bald on top, Moore had grown the hair on the left side of his head long enough to do a comb over, giving him an odd, even comic appearance. By the time Kat signaled for the bottom of the hour break they were all laughing hysterically at the mental and physical shortcomings of one of the most powerful men in Washington.

Kat left the studio, poured a sixteen ounce can of beer into a pewter mug, and returned to his work station. During the final half hour of his work day it was his custom to indulge himself with a cold one. He took a small sip and went over the program notes for the remainder of the show.

"Kat!" Sundance called to him, and motioned him back to his screen. The note there read, "The Eskimo called. No joke. Wants to talk right after the show. Important."

Looking up to Sundance, he said, "Set the call up for 6:15. If that's a problem, let me know."

Reclining steeply in his chair, Kat stretched his long legs and parked them on a corner of his desk. Forty-three years old, he had the body of a decathlete. Thanks to constant exercise, his 185 pounds were perfectly distributed on a six foot, two inch frame. He was a fairly handsome man in an ordinary way, with sandy hair cut short, and bright blue eyes. His only distinctive features were slightly hollowed cheeks and a powerful square jaw which framed a mouth curled up at one end in an almost constant smirk. While his admirers saw his expression as amused irony, it was more accurately described as that of an overgrown juvenile delinquent. As usual, he wore tennis shoes, white socks, loose fitting khaki pants, and a white T-shirt with the words "Kat Rules" written in blood red above his left breast.

His studio was a fifty foot bus, inspired by the example of C-SPAN's mobile unit, crammed with broadcasting equipment. After his divorce two years ago, he had decided to take his show on the road. His program had by now originated from every one of the contiguous 48 states. As he looked out his picture window at Key West's small boat harbor, he considered, yet again, his next move. Yes, by God, he was going to do it. He would buy a yacht, big enough to hold his studio, and live on, and sail around the world. It might cost him fifteen million dollars, but what the hell. Life is short, and what was money for, anyway?

His crew would go with him, he knew. They were a tight group, all single, and having a great time together. But it wouldn't be enough for Kat. He missed Melanie, his ex-wife, and George, his ten year old son.

The divorce was all his fault, and all her doing. He'd gone to South Africa to hunt, with bow and arrow, the Cape buffalo. The great beast had fallen, but so did Kat. At a hotel in Capetown he got drunk and bedded a cocktail waitress. When Melanie confronted him with incriminating evidence, he panicked and told the truth. She went to the lawyer the next day.

Recollecting it all, Kat dropped his chin, shook his head, and whispered, "Dumb shit" to himself. Melanie and the boy were in Virginia now. He'd go there in the spring, maybe sooner. Their recent phone conversations had been cool, but not hostile. Maybe there was still a chance. Perhaps the prospect of sailing around the globe with George, home schooling him, might entice her. He made up his mind finally, for certain. He would begin the purchase arrangements on Monday.

He called out to Grossberg, "Time?"

"Forty seconds."

To Sundance, "Jane wired in?"

"Loud and clear."

"Boss," he murmured, and took another sip of beer. He would pace his consumption to make it last until six, when he, Sundance, Grossberg, and Aranzubia normally held a post-production conference around a keg in the rear of the bus.

The television next to his computer screen showed a rosy cheeked McClenahan posed in front of the Capitol, bundled heavily against the January cold, blonde hair tossing in the breeze. The Fox News Network provided the live video for the broadcast. The network encouraged the Katman to feature its reporters, and he did, to some extent. But only reporters he liked. He liked McClenahan

His green light flashed on and he was back on the air. "It's twenty-five 'til the top of the hour and, you're right, it's the Katman. Next up, plain Jane McClenahan from the Capitol with up to the minute news of the D. C. version of "The Price is Right", then Sundance the sportsman on the NFL playoff picture. How goes the bidding, Jane? Last we heard a vote was costing two judgeships, a dam, and a hundred million in highway funds. The price going up?"

"It all depends on whose vote you're talking about, Katman. As you know, the voting is by states. South Dakota has one vote, and one Congressman. California has one vote, and 53 Congressmen. The support of a Representative from California isn't worth a lot. The support of Representative Weiskopf from Rapid City is extremely valuable."

The Katman "ruled" South Dakota, and Rapid City. He had spent a week traversing the state on Highway 90, stopping each afternoon for his broadcast. It was a tiny market, but his ratings there were as high as anywhere in the country. He decided to spend a little time on Mr. Weiskopf. "So what is the man from Rapid going to do, and what's his price?"

"Well, like most Congressmen, during the campaign he promised that if the election was thrown into the House he would vote the way his state voted. South Dakota went for McNamara, so he'll vote for McNamara on the first ballot. But that ballot isn't going to mean a lot."

Kat knew why, but there were millions listening who might not, so he asked, "I'm sure you don't explain, plain Jane."

"You need the votes of 26 states to get elected. None of the three candidates gets even close in the first vote. On subsequent ballots, though, Representative Weiskopf, and others like him, are free agents. Free to do what they usually call 'what's in the best interest of their state, and the country.'"

"And the interests of South Dakota, and the nation, are probably best served by a dam, right? And some highway construction."

"That's right, Katman. And a price support program for wheat."

"Sounds reasonable to me. I'm sure they shouldn't get their dam, right Zube?"

"They extra should, Kat," his news man replied gravely. "They need that dam."

"Give 'em the dam!" cried Sundance.

Chuckling, Kat said lowly, "Chicken shi-" and turned back to the screen, and McClenahan. "So Weiskopf and the rest just go to the highest bidder, is that it?"

"Not quite. Weiskopf is a Republican, so he'll be strongly inclined to go for Governor Downey. President Lachey would have to beat whatever Downey's offering by a good margin. Also, it does you no good to make a deal with a loser. For the deal to pay off, you have to back the winning horse."

Grossberg interrupted by playing a tape of the trumpet fanfare heard at horse races. As it ended, Kat asked, "One last question, Jane. Which horse should I bet on?"

"President Lachey or Governor Downey. Pick 'em. Just don't bet on McNamara. Since he ran as a Tea Party independent, he has no support in either political party. And he's not dealing. The bidding war is on, and he's not in it."

"Thanks, Jane. Have a good weekend."

"Thank you, Katman. You too."

As her image disappeared Sundance spoke in the slow gravelly voice of a dirty old man. "I wonder what she's got on under that big coat."

Grossberg replied, "I had a dream about that last night, and in my dream-"

"Enough, fuantos," said Kat. "It's a quarter 'til the hour, time for the sports report from Sundance."

It was an NFL playoff weekend, and Sundance spent several minutes playfully going over injury reports, game plans and betting lines, interspersing his report with the tapes of dimwitted comments from coaches and players. When he started a tape of Bill Richey, coach of the Pittsburg Steelers, Kat shot up his arm, fist clenched, thumb extended, cueing Grossberg to "bomb" the tape. Two years previous this coach had stiffed the Katman on an interview, and made some sarcastic remarks about Kat and his show. Ever since Kat had trashed the coach, his players, the owner and fans of the Steelers, and all of western Pennsylvania. He now launched into a diatribe, a full minute's worth of childish invective and coarse insults. Finally, worn out with rage, Kat threw his arm at Grossberg, who instantly played a music bumper.

He selected the rock classic, "Summertime Blues." Going into the break, the lyrics ended with

Gonna take two weeks, gonna have a fine vacation.

Gonna take my problem to the United Nations.

Well I called my Congressman and he said "Whoa!"

I'd like to help you son, but you're too young to vote.

At 6:15 Kat set a fresh mug of beer on a disheveled desk in his small private office. He turned to a 36 inch monitor, with the latest encryption technology. Mercurieff had a similar model in his office in the Hart Building in Washington. Their conversation would be secure.

He punched in the number, and glanced down at a photograph on his desk. It showed Kat with his bow and Mercurieff with a rifle, kneeling on either side of an enormous brown bear. The huge animal lay on its side, the broken shaft of an arrow protruding from its chest.

A brilliant color image of Mercurieff appeared on his screen. The Senator was in his mid-forties, broad shouldered, heavy chested, with a heavy mass of coal black hair combed straight back from his forehead. He had pleasant, regular features, a slightly olive complexion, and warm dark hazel eyes. Like almost all natives of Kodiak, Alaska he had mixed heritage; he was somewhere between half and three quarters white, with the balance a tangled mixture of Aleut and Athapascan Indian. Despite his frivolously given nickname, he had no Eskimo blood.

He was in shirtsleeves, a crimson tie loosened at the collar. He smiled brightly as the Katman appeared on his screen. "Katman! Thanks for getting back to me. Good to see you."

Kat grinned back at his friend. "You're right. Good seein' you, Bud."

"I hear you're not too impressed with the new Speaker."

"You got that right. He's banned for life. The son of a bitch. They call us, right? Want to be on the show. So he comes on, and won't answer my damn questions! Makes me look bad. I'm havin' a cold one. Care to join me?"

Bud considered a couple seconds, and said, "What the hell. Be right back."

He returned to his chair with a long necked bottle of Coors, popped the cap, tipped it toward his screen, and took a sip. "I need a beer after today. This place is unbelievable. Effin' unbelievable."

"I hear Lachey and Downey are out buyin' votes, and you and McNamara are on the sidelines."

"That's it, pretty much."

"I'm sure you don't have some kind of plan, though, right?"

There was no way Mercurieff could, or would, be open with Kat about the Byzantine plot he was in the midst of implementing. A few people knew pieces and parts of his plan; one fellow conspirator knew almost all of it. He, and he alone, knew it all.

"What this is, Kat, is like a game of cutthroat. With two evenly matched big guys – Lachey and Downey – and one little guy, McNamara. The little guy could team up with one big guy, and take the other one out. But where would that leave the little guy? Alone, up against the remaining big guy. The only chance the little guy's got is to lay low and hope the big boys destroy one another. That's the plan. Watch them fight, try to keep it even, so neither one can beat the other."

"I read an article about the last time this happened, 1824. This was the way it went down, back then, right?"

"Pretty much. Jackson and John Quincy Adams were the big boys, and Crawford the little guy. Crawford's people tried to do the same thing that we are. But Crawford was practically on his deathbed, so they never had much of a chance."

"What about Vice President? It's either you or Tarpley, right?"

"Yup. But nobody's really worrying about that. If the House reelects President Lachey, the Senate will give him his Vice President, Tarpley. If Downey or McNamara win it's probably mine."

"So you'd take Downey over Lachey, if it came down to it."

"I don't make that choice. I've got no use for either one of them, and in our game of cutthroat, once the little guy takes sides with one of the big guys, it's over, for him. And the Vice Presidency under Downey wouldn't be worth, as the man said, a bucket of warm spit."

Kat leaned back in his chair, sipped his beer, and gazed at his friend. In the years they had known one another, Bud had never asked a favor. But he was going to ask for one tonight, and Kat was going to deliver for him.

Bud Mercurieff first came to Kat's attention eleven years ago when he was a freshman member of the House. On a trip home to Kodiak he was assaulted by a drunken fisherman, apparently motivated by some obscure and ancient feud. Defending himself, he had beaten him into submission. A member of Congress engaging in a street brawl with a drunk naturally got a lot of press.

Despite the fact that Bud refused to say a word about the altercation to the media, he became, briefly, a minor celebrity. When he was elected to the Senate a year later Kat had him as a guest on his show. They hit it off, and became friends. Mercurieff appeared on the

show every few weeks, and once a year they went on an expedition together. Fifteen months ago they had gone to Kodiak, where Kat, with bow and arrow, had taken a ten foot, 1300 pound brown bear.

"So Lachey and Downey cut each other up so badly that neither one can win, and then the only option is McNamara?"

"More or less. It's got to be one of the three. Downey and Lachey, going at each other, no holds barred. At some point, near the end, when it becomes clear to Lachey, or to Downey, that they can't win it themselves, they throw their votes to McNamara, just to keep the other guy from winning."

"Somebody's got to win, right?"

"Right. In Congress, you have to remember that the members are going to do what they perceive to be in their own personal self-interest. The House is in the driver's seat, and they're loving it. For any House member to get anything out of this, there has to be a winning side. It's in their interest, so that's what they'll do."

"Well, Bud, you know I'm with you. What have you got in mind, for me?"

Mercurieff took another swig of beer and rearranged himself in his chair. "People don't know how bad this thing is getting, Kat. I've got to believe, if they did, they wouldn't put up with it. There are guys who've been around the hill for forty years, they say they've never seen anything quite like it. And the public seems to think, well, hell, they're all politicians, so what do you expect? It's not good Kat. What's happening is, in fact, not that complicated. In exchange for their votes, people are taking bribes."

"You mean, like the guy from South Dakota, getting a dam, or highway, or some kind of wheat deal?"

"No, Kat. That's typical Washington. No, I'm talking about people taking cash for their vote."

"Can you prove that?"

"Yes I can. I've got a guy with the evidence. I'd like you to have him on your show. Break the story."

"Jesus Christ, Bud! That's pretty heavy. I'm not Nightline, you know, or Sixty Minutes. I'm just a yuckster, an entertainer, you know that."

"What I know is, I can trust you, number one. And I know that if you promote this thing, you can get twenty-five, thirty million people tuning in."

"Chicken shit."

"Of course we thought about going to the big media. But this guy doesn't trust them. And, frankly, neither do I."

Kat sighed audibly and sipped his beer. "When do you want to do this?"

"Wednesday the tenth. You know where you're going to be then?"

"No. No I don't. I'm thinking on that. What else can you tell me about this guy?"

"Well, for now, I'd just as soon keep it on a need to know basis. He's the real deal, though. Be a good guest. He's got audio tapes he'll want to play. I'll put him in touch with you on Tuesday, if that's O. K."

"Sure. The thing is, I'll be promoting this thing, big time, Monday and Tuesday. He's got to show, or I look like a fool. Also, those tapes. We'll want to play excerpts, not the whole tape. We need to get a copy of them, so we can do some editing. We'd need them Wednesday morning, at the latest."

"I'll make the arrangements. You'll have them first thing Wednesday morning. And don't worry. He'll be there."

"One more thing, Bud. I'm sticking my neck out here, which is fine. But is there really a way you can win this thing? It seems like things are pretty much stacked against you."

"Well, sometimes you get the bear. And sometimes the bear gets you. But it's winnable. It really is". Bud shook his head, raised his eyebrows, and spread his arms apart. Grinning broadly, he leaned toward his screen, his eyes boring in on his friend. "Kat!"

Bud was laughing lowly now, as the Katman returned his gaze. "Trust me," he said.

Now they were both laughing aloud.

Mercurieff had gone without a full night's rest for two days, and the beer was making him drowsy. He set it aside and focused on the next day's business. Tomorrow was the date set by law for the official canvas of the Electoral College. A joint session of Congress would tally the results of last year's Presidential election. The outcome was known, and the proceedings would be a formality. The Tea Party slate of Senators McNamara and Mercurieff would receive 215 electoral votes, Democratic President Ferdinand Lachey and Vice President Lem Tarpley would get 183 votes, and the Republican ticket of Governor Broderick Downey and Representative Joanna Krueger would garner the balance of 140. Lachey's term would expire two weeks from tomorrow, at noon on Saturday, January the 20th. The house, voting by state, had until then to choose the next President.

The networks would broadcast the session live, so most of the 535 members of the House and Senate would attend. Mercurieff would not be on the floor. He was, de facto, in charge of the McNamara forces in the House, and there was much work to attend to.

There was, of course, a great deal more to Mercurieff's plan than the simple game of cutthroat he had given the Katman. In order to have any hope of success it had to be absolutely secret. Coke McNamara himself didn't know all of what Mercurieff was plotting.

The person who knew the most was Representative Tommy Ledoux of Louisiana. Ledoux was the very last of a dying breed – a staunchly conservative southern Democrat. He and Bud had served together on the Resource Committee during Mercurieff's brief time in the House. He became, and remained, one of Bud's political mentors. He would play a pivotal role in the plan. A video call to Ledoux would be Bud's last of the night. He had to get some rest.

He smiled affectionately at his screen as Ledoux's image appeared. He wore a dark grey suit coat, patterned blue bow tie, and bright red suspenders over his white dress shirt. His thin, curly, snow white hair contrasted sharply with his scarlet complexion. His thick bifocals, prominent hearing aid and triple chin made for a somewhat comic appearance.

"Howdy, Bud."

"Evening, Tommy. How's Louisiana?"

"Louisiana lookin' fine." Louisiana's six member delegation was split three ways – Ledoux and Representative Mathews for McNamara, two Republicans for Downey, and two Democrats for Lachey. One of Ledoux's many responsibilities was to keep it split. He had served with Mathews for twenty years, and was convinced he would keep his word to stay with McNamara. If he didn't, Ledoux would ruin him. "My boy Mathews isn't goin' anywhere. I talk to him every day. The man's a rock, a Goddamn rock!"

Mercurieff and Ledoux shared a quiet laugh together. Bud knew why Mathews was reliable – Tommy had him by the balls.

"You heard anything about Texas?" Ledoux inquired.

"Well, Coke swears he's got sixteen solid. Downey's got twelve. But... I don't know." Senator McNamara had taken charge of their effort in his native Texas. The members supporting him were old friends and personal beneficiaries, motivated by loyalty, self-interest, and Texas pride. They had pledged to vote for Coke McNamara until hell froze over. Bud figured hell would freeze after the first two ballots, if not before.

"The word's out, Bud. Texas is gone. Downey got seven of our votes; that gives him nineteen, and the state. Nothin' we can do. Big oil, big money. You know."

"Oh, shit. Coke's going be royally pissed. Need to let him know, cool him down. I'll have to call him. That leaves four that are hung solid – Nevada, Idaho, and Maine, along with Louisiana, right?" The delegations of these three states were evenly divided. An essential component of their strategy was to keep them that way, thus casting their vote for no candidate.

"That's right. I talk to those folks two, three times a day. I talk to 'em in my sleep. They seem strong to me. Of course, they just got here. The more votes they have to make, the weaker they'll get. And we shouldn't give up on Colorado, either. We've still got one out of the seven – that ol' boy from Grand Junction – and the other six are slicin' each other up pretty good. They may stay split for two, even three votes."

"Good. Even if we only hang those four, and keep the eight we're counting on for Coke, Lachey or Downey will need 26 of the 38 that are left. I can't see how they get there."

"They can't, Bud. Both of 'em have fifteen, sixteen states locked up tight, in the bank."

The two men looked at one another silently for a few moments. The Tea Party ticket of McNamara-Mercurieff had won the electoral votes of twenty-one states. Only eight of them remained firmly committed to McNamara. Publicly and privately, a majority within each of these eight delegations insisted they would keep their word and reflect the people's will. In addition to winning a plurality of the electoral vote, McNamara had prevailed in the popular vote as well, with 36% of the total, to Lachey's 32% and Downey's 31%. Now, two months after the election, the polls showed a solid majority of Americans believed the House should make McNamara the next President.

Ledoux and Mercurieff were both asking themselves the same unspoken questions. Which of the eight McNamara states, and the four that were split, would leave first? Who would betray them, on what vote, at what price, and for whom?

Finally Mercurieff broke the silence. "You talk to our man Collins from Nevada today?"

"I did. He's good. Real solid. A constitution man."

"I've arranged for him to go on the Katman's radio show on Wednesday. Tell his story. Let him know tomorrow, if you could."

"Sure. I'll see him on the floor. Your disc jockey buddy is on board, then?"

"He is. Completely. And this disc jockey is capable of drawing an audience of twenty-five million or more, once he starts promoting this thing. Plus a few million on television. A lot of people love this guy. And, he's a friend. We can count on him."

As Mercurieff was speaking Ledoux watched him intently, reading his body language, the tiniest changes in facial expression, the look in his eyes, listened to the timbre of his voice. There was no sign of weakness, no hint of being overwhelmed by the task ahead. In the course of his thirty years in Congress, Ledoux had known thousands of politicians, hundreds of them quite well. Of all of them, he loved Bud best. The fact that Mercurieff had no father, and Ledoux was childless, added another dimension to their relationship.

"Well, we'll see. What's he call himself? Batman?"

"No, Tommy. He's the Katman. His friends call him Kat."

"Ridic'lous."

"You know, I'm thinking of the seven in Texas, who the oil companies are peeling away from Coke. Some of those guys made some pretty bold statements. Don't mess with Texas. Some crap about the Alamo. They are way out on a limb."

"Forget it, Bud. They're cashing out. Texas is gone."

"I believe you. But maybe we try and make them pay a price. Let's throw it in their faces. Not to get them back, but to show some other weak reeds what's in store for them if they sell us out. What do you think?"

"Fine. But don't try and fail. You've got to make them suffer, bad, real bad. Otherwise we're sending the exact opposite message – you can sell out and get away with it."

"You've got a list of these guys, and their districts?"

"Yeah, I do."

"E-mail it to me. I'm going to forward it to Kat, see if he's interested in going after them. If he is, I'll call some people in the media, get them on it, too."

"Will do."

Their conversation turned to another facet of their plan, one in which Tommy would play the central role. After ten minutes of walking through the maneuver step by step they signed off for the night. Bud notified the Secret Service he wanted to be driven home. As he waited for the agents to get him, he checked his e-mail, and got the list from Ledoux. He sent it on to the Katman, with an explanatory note. He smiled as he thought of what the Kat could do to them, if he chose to.

Kat read the e-mail from Mercurieff just before he was about to join his gang for their traditional Friday beer guzzling. He spent ten minutes thinking it over, and made a decision.

They could tell something was up from the moment he came into the room. Rarely had they seen him so agitated. Normally a Friday post production conference was a laid back affair, devoted to beer and planning fun and games for the weekend. Tonight, though, Kat was pumped.

"We're on a mission, boys," he announced.

"Mission?" asked Aranzubia. "Mission? Chicken shit!"

"But wait. I didn't think we did missions," said Grossberg. Typically, the massive, laconic board operator was taking his cue from the older, more aggressive newsman. Kat and Aranzubia were tight, going back fifteen years. It was safe to follow him in questioning an idea from the boss.

Sundance, "the Kid", at 26 the youngest of the group, nodded his agreement with the others.

Kat, as always, liked being challenged – up to a point. On air, it was one of the secrets of his show's success. Off air, it allowed them to travel in relative harmony. "Here's the deal. For the next week, maybe two weeks, we're focused on the presidential thing, back in D. C. I've

been talkin' to the Eskimo, and he tells me the shit that's goin' down up there is totally crazy. Nobody's seen anything like it. Monday's show, we start poundin' 'em. Zube, tomorrow we work. I'd like to have half a dozen bits ready, or in the works. Later tonight I'll call L. A. and tell 'em to be set up to go in production Sunday afternoon." A "bit" was a song parody, a skit, a mock news report, or an impersonation. Normally they were co-written by Kat and Aranzubia, then e-mailed to the show's executive producer in Los Angeles. There an ensemble of three performers recorded them and transmitted them back to Kat.

"Also, a week from today I want us on the National Mall, parked by the Washington Monument, just like we were last summer. You made the arrangements with the Park Service before, Kid. Monday morning, first thing, I want you on the phone to those guys. I want another permit, for next Friday, and then the whole following week, Monday the 15th through Friday the 19th. I want it in writing before this Monday's show, so I can start promoting it. If they drag their feet let me know and I'll put some heat on 'em."

"Ah, you're right," replied Sundance. "I remember the guy I dealt with last time. Big fan of yours. Shouldn't be a problem."

Aranzubia stared out the window, sipping his beer, a look of concern on his face. A year older than Kat, one of his roles was that of a skeptic, in counterpoint to the enthusiasm of his best friend. Born and raised in the barrio of Chula Vista, just south of San Diego, he had attached himself to Kat at the very beginning of their radio careers. Because of his association with Kat, he was, by his standards, a wealthy man. When Kat, Sundance, and Grossberg finished discussing the technical details of a week's broadcast from the Mall in Washington he turned to Kat and asked, "These people, that we start pounding on Monday, do they include, like, the President of the United States? And, maybe, the governor of New York, who may very well be the next President? And most of the members of Congress?"

"Could," said Kat.

"Chicken shit," said Grossberg.

"And as long as we're having this mind attack," continued Aranzubia, "I'm sure we don't start pissing on the networks, and all the newspapers. For not doing their job, of exposing all this crap."

"Boss," said Sundance.

"Well, I'm not sure we need to go there," said Kat.

"I would hope not," said Aranzubia. "You're an entertainer, Kat. You're in show business. Is this good for business? How many times, over the years – Christ, dozens and dozens – has some do-gooder come to you with some plan to save the world. And you never say 'No'.

You say "Fuck no! Are you crazy? Crusader Kat? I don't think so!' But now we're on a mission. But wait, it's not a crusade? It is. It extra is."

"Two weeks, is what it is," said Kat. "And we'll have some fun with it. The thing is, Zubie, nobody gave me this mission. The Eskimo asked me to book a guest for Wednesday, which I agreed to do. He didn't give me an assignment. I'm doin' this on my own. And we've gone after Presidents before. Remember what we used to do to Obama?"

"That was some of the finest stuff ever," said Grossberg.

"You're right. It extra was. And we are going to have some fun with this. Zube?"

"You and your amazing mind attacks. Let's go for it."

"Boss. Now, we've got to plan next week. We only stop in places we've been before, where we've handled all the logistics. I'm thinking we do Monday from Orlando. Kid, after you talk to the Park Service you'll need to get through to the man at Disney."

Saturday, January 6th

It was a little before eleven in the morning at the Downey for President's luxurious campaign headquarters in Washington D. C. The candidate and his top adviser, confidante, and henchman, one Frank Bickford, were strategizing on the upcoming vote in the House of Representatives.

Broderick Downey was a beefy caricature of an old Irish New York cop, except for the fact that he was perfectly coiffed, tailored, tanned, and manicured. Sixty years old, in the middle of his second term as Governor of New York, he was a natural born politician. He never forgot a name or a face, a slight or a favor. He never got mad; he always got even. While he was corrupt, he was not vicious. He lived, and governed, by his own version of the golden rule: tit for tat. Political idealists were a never ending source of amusement to him. At a very young age he learned the essence of his brand of politics – what's in it for me?

Their discussion turned to Texas. "Here's the big news, Brod. We had twelve, remember?"

"And we need nineteen. The oil companies were in charge of this. What's up?"

"Exxon took point, but all the majors helped out. BP was especially helpful. There's this one guy, from Midland, I didn't think we could ever get. Well, they got him, and six others. Texas is ours."

Downey slammed his hand on his desk, leaned back in his chair and laughed out loud. "God damn, all right! Jesus, is McNamara going to be pissed. His own damn state, taken from him by oil – his own damn industry!"

"Yeah, his industry. But he was always an independent, in the oil sense. The majors never had much use for him. And once we're in, we've got to come through for these guys."

"Well, we'll give it our best shot, that's for sure. A deal's a deal. We'll make every effort. Within reason, of course."

A flashing light told Downey his secretary wished to speak. "Yes, Jackie," he said.

"Representative Krueger is here for her eleven o'clock appointment, Governor."

"Very good. Tell her I'll be ready in a few minutes."

"Want me to leave?" asked Bickford.

"Hell, no. You stay and help make it short. Why the cowgirl insists on seeing me . . . but, I know, Wyoming's vote counts just as much as Texas. And she is Wyoming's vote."

Putting Krueger on the ticket had been Downey's idea, and opposed by Bickford. It was still a bit of a sore point between them. "At least we're getting something of value from your illustrious running mate."

"Enough, Frank. So, I was wrong. Made sense at the time. Gender, geography, generation – remember? Those damn pollsters are the ones that sold me on her."

"Conceptually, the idea of a beautiful, well-spoken thirty-nine year old blonde from out west was not bad," Bickford replied. "But pollsters don't run campaigns, and don't know the first qualification for V. P. – do what you're told."

Specifically, Joanna Kruger had been instructed to assume the role of attack dog. Her job was to distort the record, and besmirch the reputation, of Senator Coke McNamara. She refused, forcing Downey to do it himself. His efforts were fairly effective. But, as they feared, President Lachey received more of a benefit from the effort than Downey himself.

"Tell me about it. Anyway, let's wrap this up before she gets in here. With Texas, we're up to seventeen. Nine to go."

"No, it's eighteen, eight to go." Bickford's voice had softened, and lowered. He'd saved the most surprising news for last. "Our man from Vegas called last night. Brewster tells him the old nut from Elko— the freshman Tea party guy, Collins — has been persuaded. We've got Nevada. We don't need to know how they got this guy. Brewster just wants us to remember who gets credit."

Downey's pleasure at this news was tempered by the danger of having any association with Daniel J. Brewster, a flamboyant, controversial, and erratic casino magnate. "That's good. Tell our man in Vegas to tell Brewster that the message has been received, and welcomed. Then tell him to leave the country — we don't even want to know where he goes. He can get back in touch with you in a few months. Understood?"

"Got it."

Downey flipped a switch on his intercom. "Jackie, please show Representative Krueger in."

They both stood as Downey's secretary ushered her into his office. Downey, never immune to the charms of the fair sex, resisted the temptation to ogle. She was dressed modestly enough, in a conservative grey business suit, cut well below the knee, and plain white blouse; her ash blonde hair was worn up; she wore the minimum amount of makeup. Nonetheless she was a true beauty, and thus a political anomaly. Women this good looking did not run for political office.

The explanation was simple enough. Her former husband, Jack Krueger, was the scion of one of the oldest ranching clans in Wyoming, politically active for generations. Elected to Congress at the age of 38, he served three years before being killed in a small plane accident. Childless, and preferring the hectic pace of Congress to the country life of Wyoming, she arranged to be appointed to serve out his term. Like every other Congressional widow who attempted it, she won election in her own right when that term ended.

This was her first meeting with Downey since the election. During the campaign she was touted as a trusted member of his inner circle, valued for her knowledge of Congress, western issues, and her feminine perspective. This was an utter fabrication. She was on the ticket because she was a woman, and her opinions were never considered.

Under the twelfth amendment, since she and Downey placed third, he was still a candidate; she was not. She no longer had Secret Service protection, and had quickly faded from public view. Under a statute passed for her benefit by the Wyoming legislature, she had been allowed to run simultaneously for Vice President and the House of Representatives. Her

easy victory for the latter meant that she, and she alone, controlled her state's vote in the House. That was why Downey agreed to meet her, as she was well aware.

She had requested the appointment to get the Wyoming media off her back. Still a great celebrity back home, she had been pestered with questions about her current relationship with Downey, and her role in the ongoing effort to have him elected by the House. Since the truth would be too embarrassing, this meeting would allow her to maintain the fiction that she was still part of the team.

Seated after the opening pleasantries, she got to the point. "People have been asking me where you stand in the House, Broderick. They assume I have some inside knowledge, and that I'm assisting you. What can I tell them?"

Turning to Bickford, Downey asked, "Frank, you have been working with Joanna, getting help from her on persuading her colleagues, have you not?"

Squirming in his chair, he replied, "Well, actually, Gov, I've got to admit we may have kind of let that slip under the radar scr..."

Downey threw his pen down on his desk, and thundered, "Damn it, Bickford! Did I not specifically instruct you to get Joanna involved, particularly with women, and the western states?"

"Yes, you did. And I admit, I didn't attend to it personally. I delegated it. It's my fault. I apologize."

"This is outrageous! Unacceptable, Frank. Totally unacceptable. Now, I tell you what. We're going to get her involved right now. Joanna, your western neighbor, Idaho, is split. Representative O'Dea, from the first district is with us. We have a problem in the second, eastern district. Her name is Smith. She's a freshman, ran as a Tea Party independent, supporting McNamara. Still supports him. Will not listen to reason. McNamara's out of it. He has no chance. It's either me or Lachey, take your pick. As you well know, my western policies are one hell of a lot better for Idaho than Lachey's. I'd like you to talk to Ms. Smith. Educate her a little. And tell her this, please, from me, personally. I'll tell her myself, if she wants. She votes for me, she gets to pick my Secretary of the Interior. Her choice. Now, that's a hell of a deal, for her, for Idaho."

If Joanna did not know Downey as well as she did, she would have taken all this seriously. It was bull shit, all of it. "I'll accept that assignment, Broderick. I've met Representative Smith several times. We have a good rapport. I'll report back to Frank. What is the count, by the way? How many states have you got?"

Downey looked sternly at Bickford, then nodded his head. "We've got twenty-two, Joanna, as of today," Bickford said solemnly. "We're not saying this publicly, of course. We don't want Lachey to know how close we are. Idaho would be twenty-three. We're very close."

Joanna Krueger was a beautiful blonde, but she was not dumb, and she despised being patronized. This last, most bold faced lie, was enough. She rose from her chair, smiled at Downey, and prepared to leave.

Sunday, January 7th

For the Mercurieffs, Sundays were devoted to family, and normal life. Bud and Pattie, his wife of twenty-two years, attended traditional Russian Orthodox services at St. Nicholas Cathedral, then went out for a light lunch. In the afternoon they had lengthy video calls with their son, in his second year at the Air Force Academy, and their daughter, a freshman living in a dorm at Villanova. In the evening they would go to a movie or concert, followed by dinner out.

They met when Bud was in his first year of law school at Boalt Hall at UC Berkeley, and Pattie was an undergraduate, in her senior year there. He worked part time at a drug store to support himself. She worked there to pay for her Porsche, which her parents refused to help her with, since its engine was in the rear, and was considered unsafe.

When he was twelve, and living in the village of Ouzinkie with his mother, Bud's knee had been severely injured, disabling him from many physical activities, and giving him a severe limp. Primarily because of this, he had very limited experience with girls. But when he was a junior at Cal, the doctors at Cowell Hospital on campus had repaired his knee. Knee replacement surgery had been, up to then, far too expensive for him to afford, but his student health insurance made the operation possible. For the first time since childhood he was not crippled, and could have a normal social life. But he had very little experience with dating, had barely any money, and had never had a serious romantic relationship.

Pattie, on the other hand, was extremely social, with a wide circle of friends, many of them dating back to early grammar school in Berkeley. She lived with her parents in a magnificent home in the hills above Berkeley, with a panoramic view of San Francisco Bay. She was a beautiful girl, tall, slender, with long blonde hair, soft blue eyes and fine features. To avoid unwanted advances while at work she deliberately tried to appear as plain looking as she could.

When she accepted Bud's awkward invitation for a movie date she knew very little about him, aside from the fact that he was a law student. But there was something about him that piqued her interest. Bud quickly fell in love with her, and soon she found herself loving him

as well. Within a month they were seeing each other constantly, and Bud had the first, and last, love affair of his life. They were married when she graduated, six months after they met.

At home after dinner they relaxed with a final drink, cognac for Pattie, Jameson's Irish whiskey for Bud. For some reason she had seemed agitated during dinner. Now it came out. "Bud, that big article about you, in this morning's Post, it had a long section about the death of some Native kid, in Kodiak, years ago. They more or less accused you of having killed him. You know the story I'm talking about."

"Oh, yeah."

She put down her drink and looked him in the eye. "Well, is it true?"

"You've heard that rumor before, it's bullshit. It's all politics. They tried to use this against me when I first ran for Congress, remember? They dig this stuff up, make it sound convincing, trying to damage me politically. It's just a hit piece."

"But you did summer work in a cannery in Kodiak, when you were in high school, right?"

"Yeah, that part's true."

"And the boy who was killed. He came from the same village as you."

"That's true."

"You're hiding something, Bud. There was more detail, convincing, like, evidence, in that article than anything I've seen before."

"Do you really have to know?"

"Yes, I do. I'm your wife. I want to know the truth."

He hesitated. He had always been as honest as possible with Pattie. The untruths he had spoken to her were white lies, told to avoid hurting her feelings, or those of others. Aside from this one. The incident she was asking about was from 30 years ago, and he had lied about it for all those 30 years.

"I confessed to a priest after it happened. Other than that, I've never told this to anyone, my whole life. Do you want to know the whole story?"

"Yes, I do."

Fifteen year old Bud Mercurieff sat on a stump outside his tent, in the woods above Chichagof Bay, smoking a Marlboro, watching his fire and the sunset. It had been another twelve hour day of labor at the cannery where he worked as a slimer, gutting and beheading salmon in preparation for canning. He made seven dollars an hour, which meant, with overtime, he earned \$98 today, gross.

His thoughts were not on work or wages tonight, though. They were on Alex Carlnikoff, the boy who had maimed him four years ago in their native village of Ouzinkie. Maimed him by knocking him down and repeatedly kicking his right knee so viciously that the joint was completely mangled. Within days after the attack Bud and his mother left the village and moved to Anchorage. The doctors at the Native Health Center there had done their best, but the knee was still disfigured, and Bud walked with a severe limp.

Alex was eighteen now. He was working as a deck hand on the MV Ragged Raider, a purse seiner run by an uncle. The boat had just come in to Kodiak from a bonanza run in the Shelikof Strait, weighted low to the gunnels with its catch of red salmon. Alex's share, for two weeks work, would be better than two thousand dollars, and he would be getting drunk tonight.

Bud and Alex encountered one another six weeks ago, just after Bud arrived back in Kodiak for the summer. They were at the small boat harbor, where Bud had come to see if he could sign on as a hand on one of the fishing boats. Alex was repairing a net on his uncle's boat when he spotted Bud walking down the slip.

"No shit. Herman Mercurieff. What the fuck are you doin' back in Kodiak?"

Bud averted his gaze, and said in a low, flat voice, "I'm lookin' for a berth."

"You ain't gonna get no berth here, shithead, and if you're smart you'll just get the fuck out of town, before your other leg gets fucked up."

Bud hobbled away in silence, blood boiling with a combination of shame, fear, and black rage. The boy who had destroyed his knee now threatened him again. It was too much. He ached to get Alex Carlnikoff.

They saw each other again, just two weeks ago. The night before Alex and his boat were due to head out to the Shelikof, Bud and two new friends from the cannery were standing outside a pizza parlor in downtown Kodiak on a Saturday night. An old pickup drove by, circled the block, and stopped in front of them. Alex Carlnikoff emerged from the passenger side, drunk. He staggered to Bud, and slurred, "You're still here? Warned you. Fuckin' warned you, man."

Quick, like a cat, Bud slapped Carlnikoff hard on his cheek, then glared at him, the hatred burning in his eyes. Reacting wildly, Carlnikoff charged, ramming his shoulder into Bud's stomach. Bud twisted as he went down, getting his left forearm under Carlnikoff's chin. With his right hand clenching his left wrist, he rammed his forearm into the older boy's throat. Carlnikoff struggled frantically to break the death grip on his neck, clawing, kicking and punching in desperation as Bud's forearm cut off his air.

As Bud's stranglehold began to subdue Carlnikoff, the driver's side of the pickup opened and a middle aged man walked quickly to Bud, a fishing knife in his hand. As Bud's friends retreated, the man shoved the knife on to his cheek, drawing blood. "Get off, kid," he said.

Bud released his grip, rolled off his opponent, and limped away. Gasping and grabbing his throat, Carlnikoff tried to talk, gurgling, "Kill him! Kill him, Joe!"

The man said, "Get back in the truck, asshole. We're callin' it a night."

"No! No fuckin' way! Gimme that knife. I'm gonna kill that fucker!"

His uncle grabbed Carlnikoff by the collar and said, "Get...in the fuckin'truck."

"You're dead meat!" Carlnikoff yelled as the truck lurched away. "I'll find you tomorrow and kill you, you son of a bitch!"

As Bud recalled the incident, he added some branches to his fire, and made up his mind. Tonight was the night. It was either Herman Mercurieff or Alex Carlnikoff.

Bud had heard that when Alex got drunk, his aunt and uncle wouldn't allow him in their house, forcing him to spend the night in an isolated shack on the beach. Tonight, for sure, he would be sleeping it off, alone.

Walking through the timber, above the shore road, Bud limped the three miles to the shack where Alex would almost certainly end up tonight. He found a place in the trees, off the road, with a clear view of the shack, and settled in for a wait.

Shortly after one o'clock he rubbed out his last cigarette as headlights approached from town. The same old pickup slowed to a halt directly above the shack, and out tumbled Alex Carlnikoff. Bud heard an exchange of garbled curses before the pickup made a U turn and headed back toward town.

As he expected, Carlnikoff was very drunk, staggering toward the shack. Bud looked right and left, saw no lights, and hurried down the hill to the edge of the road. He paused, looking, listening, and quietly crossed it, his heart pounding in his chest.

Carl Nikoff had slipped and fallen, and he uttered a low curse. He started to regain his feet, but slipped again, and lay on his side, breathing heavily, as Bud approached him from behind.

"Hey, Alex."

"Wha, wha?"

"It's me, Alex. Herman."

Carl Nikoff rolled over and looked up at Mercurieff. Low clouds darkened the sky, and in his stupor he had no idea who stood over him. "Whaya wan'? Whona fuck are you?"

"It's me, Alex. It's Herman. Herman Mercurieff, Alex. You know me. You want to fight, Alex? Let's fight."

"Fuck youuu! Fuck youuu!, he yelled as he struggled to his knees.

"Stand up and fight, you chicken shit." Since his drunken opponent had two good legs, and was older, taller, and heavier than himself, Mercurieff figured it was a fair fight. When Carl Nikoff found his feet he held up his hands. Bud took one step forward and smashed his right fist into Alex's mouth, knocking him on his back. The sensation of feeling Alex's lips between his teeth and Bud's knuckles felt good, and he growled, "Get up, asshole."

Carl Nikoff garbled a curse as he rolled on one side, got on all fours, and struggled to his feet, his clothes covered in mud. When he reached behind his back and began fumbling, Bud knew what to expect, and he unsheathed his own narrow, eight inch fillet knife. He had gutted thousands of fish with this blade that summer, and it felt like an extension of his hand. He held up his hands, hiding the knife, in his right hand, behind the left. Carl Nikoff shook his head trying to clear his mind and sober up. If he recovered even part of his senses he would be more mobile than Mercurieff, a decisive advantage. Bud figured the element of surprise would give him one good opportunity. If he missed, there was a good chance he would be killed.

Carl Nikoff held his fishing knife directly in front of him as he crouched low and advanced in tiny steps. Seeing Mercurieff in his boxing stance brought a smile to his bloody lips, and he muttered, "I got you now, motherfucker." From four feet away he lunged, his knife swiping at Bud's face, cutting him slightly below the left eye. Mercurieff parried Carl Nikoff's thrusting wrist with his left arm and at the same time slashed his throat, driving his knife deep and across his neck. Squirting blood from Carl Nikoff's severed carotid arteries covered Bud's face and chest before he could push the body away.

There was no sound now, save the lapping of the waves and a light patter of rain. Bud stood over the corpse, wiping the blood off his face. He grabbed the body by the ankles and dragged it down to a skiff floating near the shack. After wrapping the neck tightly in his sweatshirt to absorb the still oozing blood, he heaved the body into the boat. He untied the bow line and clambered aboard, set the oars, and pulled toward the open sea. He would wrap the anchor chain around Carlnikoff's neck and throw him, anchor attached, into the hundred fathom trench two miles out. Within days the crabs would cover it, munching on the flesh of what had been Alex Carlnikoff.

And then he would row back to shore, set the skiff adrift, and return to his tent, and work in the morning.

"And no one will ever know," he said to himself, pulling hard on the oars, his heart still racing, reviewing his plans. "No one'll know." He repeated the phrase to himself, over and over, in time with his oar stroke.

When Bud finished the story, after a few moments of silence, Pattie asked, "You were fifteen?"

"Yeah, fifteen. I confessed it to a priest right after, but other than that I've kept it to myself. You have to promise you won't ever talk about this to anyone."

"I can keep a secret. Is that where you got that little scar, under your left eye?"

"Yeah."

"Why did the other kid hate you so much, to do that to your knee?"

"He was jealous. There was a girl, Mary was her name. All the boys in the village were crazy about Mary. Carlnikoff came from the most prominent family in the village, the most money, the best boat, nicest house. He figured Mary should want him. But she didn't. She wanted me."

"On that note, I'm going to bed. It's late."

The tone of her voice, and the look in her eye, told him all he needed to know. He was in luck tonight.

Monday, January 8th

At 7:15 Bud sat with his second cup of coffee in his kitchen, getting ready for the ride to work. He mentally went through his plans for the day, and the week. There were rumors that the Supreme Court had a decision on the District of Columbia lawsuit, and was prepared to issue it at any time. Two of its members were Lachey appointees, and were believed by some, including Bud, to be doing his bidding in forcing a delay. But other members were supposedly resisting them, and there was good evidence that a ruling would come no later than Thursday, the 11th. Which would mean the first vote on Friday, which would then mean the plan which Mercurieff and Ledoux had been working on since the election would be set in motion on Saturday the 13th, just a week before the deadline of January 20th.

There were so many imponderables, so many possible scenarios, that it sometimes made his head spin. There were many things he didn't know, and couldn't know, in advance. They were, so to speak, known unknowns. What really concerned him were the things he didn't know that he wasn't even aware of, things that could appear unexpectedly, out of the blue. He shrugged, and finished his coffee.

Pattie was still in bed, and he went in to say goodbye. He kissed her on the neck, and said, "I guess I'm going to have to start telling you more stories about when I was growing up."

She laughed, and said, "Stop."

"I've got to go. Love you, dear."

"Love you, too."

Alexander Van Damm, Ferdinand Lachey's oval office guest, was one of a handful of men whose advice the President actually valued. In Washington parlance he was a "wise man", a thirty year veteran of national politics at the most lofty levels.

It was his inside Washington experience that Lachey really relied on. His intelligence and ruthlessness actually left the President unimpressed. As far as he was concerned, he, himself, had no equal in those regards.

Though small in stature his mental energy suffused his physical persona. His light brown eyes, small nose, mouth and chin, were rather ordinary but for an aura of intensity that surrounded him.

He won election four years ago in a campaign that was a text book of duplicity. The national media, hopelessly infatuated by his intellectual pretensions, ignored or excused his inconsistencies. The hapless Republican, a genial Senator from Florida, was in turn mocked as a comparative moron and vilified as a pawn of big business.

His twin passions were radical environmentalism, and, in foreign policy, extreme deference to the United Nations.

The results were disastrous, and a principal factor explaining his loss of two thirds of the popular vote. He had been saved, potentially, at least, by the Tea Party candidacy of Coke McNamara. Likewise, his waiting guests, House Speaker Bob Moore and Majority Leader Mario Parenti, had benefited as well. All across the country Tea Party candidates for the House of Representatives, campaigning in tandem with McNamara, had drained votes from Republicans, allowing scores of Democratic candidates to win election with pluralities as low as 35%. As a result the Democrats won their slim majority, and Moore and Parenti their leadership positions.

Lachey and Van Damm had been discussing the calamitous state of affairs in the Middle East, but the subject only irritated Lachey, and he said, "We can talk about this some other time. Moore and Parenti are here, and we've kept them waiting long enough."

After handshakes and greetings the four men seated themselves, and Lachey said abruptly, "How in the hell did we lose Texas?"

"The oil companies got Texas, Mr. President," said Moore. "You know how they feel about you."

"And the feeling is mutual. I'm going to get the FBI to look into this. There's no doubt some criminal behavior involved. Bastards."

"Gentlemen," said Van Damm, "with the loss of Texas, our strategy of buying time, in order to give us a chance get closer to 26, is looking counterproductive. We're not gaining ground, we're losing it. We have the votes on the Supreme Court to give D. C. a vote. I'm going to communicate to them that any further delay in issuing their opinion is unnecessary."

"Wait a second, Alex," said Moore. "We think we're very close to turning several states, as we're about to discuss. Even if we only pick up one, it would reverse the momentum that Texas has given McNamara. A Supreme Court ruling, giving us D. C., would add to that momentum, get the ball rolling, so to speak. Hold off, give us a couple more days."

Van Damm and Lachey looked at one another, and Lachey shrugged. "Very well," said Van Damm. "But I've been given to understand that they are not willing to wait beyond Thursday, the eleventh. You've got until then, no longer."

Moore and Parenti nodded their assent, and Lachey said, "All right, let's get down to it. I want the state of play in every state. All of them."

The four of them spent the next two hours on their task. As the noon hour approached, Lachey closed his binder and said, "That will do for today. Everyone's got their assignments. We'll meet again tomorrow evening, after dinner, say eight o'clock?" He looked to Van Damm, who nodded. "Fine, eight o'clock. Tell me, Bob, what's the state of your caucus. You hanging together?"

"Yeah, we're doing fine, though we'd dearly love to have a few more members. I'll be meeting Muldoon, the leader of the Tea Party caucus, in a day or two, to see if we can't come to some kind of understanding. I knew him years ago, before he quit. I hope to be able to reason with him. If not, Mario will take over."

"If Muldoon doesn't cooperate, I'll approach his caucus members individually," said Parenti. "I've already begun laying the groundwork, doing the research on what they might be interested in. We hope to be able to peel at least a few of them off."

"Let Alex know if we can be of any help," said Lachey.

"One more thing, Mr. President," said Moore. "The Vice President is coming to see me this afternoon. Says he has some ideas, wants to be of help. Is he in the inner circle on this?"

Lachey and Van Damm looked at one another for a few seconds, then Lachey said, "I'm telling you this in the strictest confidence, do you understand?"

Moore and Parenti nodded their assent, and Lachey continued, "No, he is not, but we want him to think he is. We also want to know every move he makes, everyone he talks to. Mario, I'd like you to take that responsibility personally."

"Certainly, Mr. President."

"Anything you hear – anything – you get in touch with Alex right away, you hear?"

"It is five minutes past the hour, and the Katman is coming to you from Disney World, right here in Orlando, Florida. That's right, Orlando. The plan, as of Friday, was for Tampa, but times change, so plans must change. We have only one hard and fast rule on this show, right, Zube?"

"Ah, you're right."

"What rule is that?"

"Flexibility."

"You got that right. Like the politician said, he was a man of principal, and his first principle was compromise. Lots of compromisin' goin' on out deah, yes indeed. Down theah in Texas, yassuh, yassuh. In the news. What is the news, Mr. Aranzubia?"

"Well, Kat, as you mentioned, the big news today is out of the state of Texas, where seven Representatives have switched their support from Senator McNamara to Governor Downey, thus delivering the vote of Texas to Downey. This is widely seen as a death blow to McNamara's faint hopes of prevailing in the House, which – "

"We got the names of all these guys, and their districts, right?"

"Yes, we do. And their office addresses, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses."

"Good. Now, we don't often do this, but we're going to dedicate today's show to the magnificent seven. Kid, for today, we only take calls from Texas."

"Right, Kat."

"Gil, we have tapes of all seven, explaining their change of heart, right?"

"Yup. All seven," said Grossberg.

"We'll play one of them here, in a couple minutes. Who shall we start out with?"

"My favorite is Lipscomb, the one from Amarillo," said Aranzubia.

"That is one of the best, for sure," said Kat. "I'm sure we don't begin with Representative Porter Lipscomb, a giant of a man, the pride of the lucky thirteenth district of the great state of Texas, up there in the panhandle. What a man! A modern Sam Houston, he is. If only there'd been a few men like Lipscomb at the Alamo, helpin' ol' Crockett and Bowie out, well, by God, they'd a whupped up on them Mexicans, is what they would've done. You know his middle name, Zubie?"

"No, I don't."

"It's integrity, that's what it is. I'll tell you what, especially for all you folks listening in on WAML, 650 on the dial, the 50,000 watt blowtorch out there in Amarillo, after we hear from Representative Lipscomb, we're going to give out his phone numbers, for his offices in Washington and back in Amarillo, and his fax numbers, and his e-mail, and the physical addresses too, in case any of y'all might like to drop by and pay your respects. So get a

pencil and be ready to copy. Without further ado, here is the honorable Porter I. Lipscomb, the pinnacle of Texas manhood, explaining his vote for Downey."

In a lisping, high pitched voice, "Lipscomb" said, "Hi, y'all. This heah's Portah Lipscomb, an' Ah'm from Amarilla? Up there in the panhandle? Of Texas? An' Ah got 'lected to Congress? An' Ah said Ah'd for Senatah McNamara? For Pres'dent? But Ah can't, Ah jus' can't. You know why? 'Cause he's mean, that's why. Now, Gov'nah Downey, why, he's the sweetest man, an' he an' Ah —"

"Stop the tape!" shouted Kat. I can't take any more. That's it. You folks around Amarillo, stick with us through the break, we'll have those numbers for you."

He pointed again at Grossberg, who rolled the tape of today's bumper music, "God Loves Texas."

Today's show had ten minutes remaining, and Sundance was in the midst of his final sports report. The Steelers had lost their playoff game, blowing a fourteen point lead in the final quarter. Coach Richey had made some questionable decisions in the final minutes of the game, allowing the entire crew to take turns ridiculing him. Ordinarily most of the show would have been dedicated to the task, and so what they lacked in time they tried to make up for with intensity.

"What an idiot," said Aranzubia.

"The single dumbest bastard on the planet," said Kat.

"He punts?" asked Sundance. "He's on Jacksonville's forty yard line, fourth and inches, a minute and a half to go, and he punts? Jesus!"

"What happened was, and you can see this on the tape, is, he wet his pants," said Kat. "He got so excited he peed all over himself, and then he lost all his concentration. Too bad for the Steelers, but hell, that's what happens when your coach is a flabby titted lard butt girly man. Kind of sad, really."

With two minutes of air time remaining Sundance announced, "Kat, you're not going to believe this, but we've got Representative Lipscomb on line two."

"Really? I'll be damned. Representative Lipscomb, thanks for calling."

In Los Angeles, Billy Morita, one of the voices used in Kat's parodies, replied, "Mistah Katman, Ah got a bone to pick with you? You been awful mean to me."

Wednesday January 10th

The eleven Tea Party independents in the House of Representatives made three crucial decisions in the aftermath of their election. They formed their own caucus, agreed to act as a unit on procedural and organizational questions, and they elected as their leader the only one of their number with previous Congressional experience, Brian Muldoon. The 58 year old Montanan had served three terms before retiring in frustration two years ago.

As he waited for his appointment with the Speaker, Muldoon noted the lavish and ornate decoration that Moore had chosen for his office. It was too much, really, but what he would expect from Moore. He was the most rabidly partisan Democrat in the House, and the years he had spent as Minority Leader had only deepened his loathing of his predecessor, Republican Jack Riddick of Michigan, an arrogant man with intellectual pretensions. The election two months ago which restored the Democrats to power was the happiest day of Moore's life. Riddick was now Minority Leader, and the snubs and humiliations Moore had suffered under him would now be repaid.

The only fly in this ointment was the slender margin of victory. 218 votes was a majority in the House, and he had only two votes to spare. If the Tea Party caucus, or at least some of them, would join them it would make his job much easier. It was a faint hope, but worth a few minutes of his time.

"Brian!" cried Moore, shaking his hand heartily, smiling warmly. "Good to have you back. Thanks for coming by. Congratulations on your election as caucus leader."

"Thanks, Bob. Congratulations to you. You've been Speaker a week now. How does it feel?"

He sighed and shook his head. "It's an honor, but a burden, as well." He was about to go on about the difficulties he faced, but he saw a wry expression on his guest, and held back. Goddamn Muldoon. Always was an irreverent, cynical bastard.

Moore made his pitch, which contained nothing of interest to Muldoon. After an appeal to his patriotism, Muldoon replied, "There's a lot of merit in what you're saying. I'd like to be helpful. But you've got to understand the kind of people I've got in my little caucus. They're not only novices, they're true believers. And they're pretty upset with you right now."

"What are you talking about?"

Muldoon pulled a worn copy of the Constitution from his pocket and paged through it. "With respect to the election of the President, the Twelfth Amendment states 'if no person have such majority....the House of Representatives shall choose immediately, by ballot, the

President.' The votes of the Electoral College were tallied last Saturday. The Constitution says immediate. You're waiting a week. That's not immediate."

"Hell, Brian. The District of Columbia has a suit pending before the Supreme Court, claiming a vote under the 23rd Amendment. The Chief Justice has virtually guaranteed a ruling by tomorrow. I've scheduled a vote the day after. Do you want an election under that kind of legal cloud? Don't your people have any notion of the comity between the branches of government?"

"The members of my caucus read the Constitution, they read the word 'immediately', and they say obey the Constitution. They're not worried about politics, or courts. You k now, they are new in town."

"Brian, you must educate them. Teach them the value of committee assignments, the ability to move legislation, insert riders in appropriation bills, the importance of raising campaign funds. They have much to learn. As Speaker I can be of great help, or hindrance."

"I appreciate that. You have to understand, these people are a little different. They're not interested in bringing home the bacon, making a career here. They all pledged to serve no more than three terms. The normal method of breaking in a new member won't work on them. At least, not yet."

"Will you be joining the Republican Minority?"

"No. We're independent, and mean to stay that way. I promise to keep the lines of communication open. I'm a reasonable man."

"As am I, as am I." As he had assumed, Muldoon would be of no help. This afternoon Majority Leader Parenti would begin approaching the Tea Party members individually, to try and peel them off, one by one. He would do all he could to break up their caucus and undermine Muldoon's leadership. "Brian, it's been good to see you again!"

Walking out the door, Muldoon shrugged. It was as he expected. Hopefully his next meeting would be more productive. It was with his old friend from Louisiana, Tommy Ledoux.

Inside his mobile studio, parked just outside Wilmington, North Carolina, Kat looked at his in-studio guest with satisfaction. As Merculieff had promised, Representative Buck Collins, Tea Party, Nevada, told a compelling story. Collins had just completed a fifteen minute description of the bribes he had been offered, supported by tape recordings he had secretly made. In the end, he had gone to a Las Vegas casino owned by Daniel J. Brewster, and in a no limit game of high stakes poker won \$5 million dollars. He just couldn't lose. He had

turned the money over to the FBI, which was supposedly conducting an investigation. Reluctantly, Kat had gone to a commercial break. Once it concluded, they would have only a few minutes before the end of the show.

Collins' gaunt, six foot frame was in western cut white shirt, string tie with a silver and turquoise clasp, black slacks and cowboy boots. 69 years old, with a weathered, lined face, buzz cut white hair, and dark brown eyes, he had dismissed Kat's efforts at establishing some rapport. He was all business.

A perennial office seeker, he had served one term in the Nevada House a decade ago. He was a political gadfly, a crank to his detractors. There were a number of unsatisfied judgments against him, most stemming from his extensive litigation against the government of Nevada, including its court system. In his fourth run for Congress, firmly allied with the Tea Party and Coke McNamara, he beat a four man field with 30% of the vote.

"It's eight minutes before the hour, and the Katman is talking to Representative Buck Collins, from the second district of Nevada. What is the second district, Congressman?"

"It's Nevada, except for Las Vegas, so it's Nevada."

"Are you worried about retaliation, from these people that you've exposed?"

"That could happen."

"Why take that risk? What's in it for you?"

Collins lowered his head and glared directly at Kat, eyes glowing. "What makes the United States different from any other country in the world? What makes us special?"

"Well, . . . uh, it's-"

"It's what is written on some very old pieces of paper, written hundreds of years ago. One is the Declaration of Independence. You should read it, out loud, here on your show, every year, on the Fourth of July. The other is the Constitution. The ideas in these pieces of paper are the gifts of our forefathers. Handed down, generation to generation. My father explained all this to me, when I was a boy. Just like his father explained it to him. So this is what I believe. And these sons of bitches that tried to buy my vote, they defile the Constitution! And if I don't expose them, who will? And if they get away with this, then, what's left? If the office of President of the United States, created and designed for George Washington, no less, can be bought and sold, why, it's over. And we will have squandered the gift. Disgraced ourselves, in the eyes of our fathers and forefathers. And that, by God, I refuse to do!"

Kat had a minute left, but he knew when enough was enough. Grossberg would fill out the minute with a long bumper. "Representative Collins, thank you for appearing on the show."

"Happy to do it."

Friday, January 12th

Meculieff had thought long and hard about the last call of the day. The House was in session, preparing for the first vote, when he put the call in to Bill McConkey, a sometime political consultant, campaign manager, Republican National Committee official, and political jack of all trades. They met when the Republican National Committee dispatched him to Alaska to oversee Bud's first campaign for Congress. Two years later he was largely responsible for Bud's winning run for the Senate. He was a trusted confidante and personal friend. Bud's political success was one of his professional career's proudest accomplishments.

"Good evening, Bud. What's up?"

"I've got a big one for you, Bill. Totally between us."

"Between us."

"I want you to get in touch with Tarpley's guy, Palamountain."

"Whoa. There's a snake for you."

"I think you can deal with him."

"Oh, yeah."

"All right. Sometime in the next eight days I may need to talk to Tarpley, or he may need to talk to me. In confidence, totally confidential. On our side it's just you and I that know anything about this. Anything. Right?"

"Understood."

"And on their side, just Palamountain and Tarpley. We can't control that, but if they're smart they'll keep it between the two of them. My staff will know where I am, and how to reach me, twenty-four hours a day, and they will give you that information. You have my cell and home phones. We're asking Tarpley to do the same for Palamountain. So if he

wants to contact me, in complete confidence, Palamountain calls you, and arrangements are made. And it's mutual. I want to talk to Tarpley, I have you call Palamountain. Got it?"

"Oh, for sure." He looked at Mercurieff for several seconds, and asked, "Any way you can fill me in on the game plan?"

"Can't do it, Bill. I'm on my own, here. I know what I'm doing."

"And you're doing right, right?"

"As God is my judge."

"That's good enough for me. I guess I'm going to have to keep you advised of where I am for the next eight days."

"Right, of course. And Palamountain with Tarpley."

"I'm on it. Once I get through to Palamountain and find out their reaction to all this, I'll get back to you. And if there's anything else, just give me a call."

"Thanks, Bill."

It was 7:00 p. m., and the Katman and his crew were sitting in the back of their studio bus, unwinding after the last broadcast of the week. They were parked near the Washington monument, cordoned off from the public by a private security detail. A television was tuned into coverage of the House floor, muted.

"Hell of a week, guys," said Kat. "You all did a totally finer job all week, and I'm sure I don't appreciate it. You're right, I extra do."

"Chicken shit," said Sundance.

"That old boy Collins was the best," said Aranzubia. "Complete bad ass."

"Hard to tell," said Grossberg. "So, Kat, is the Eskimo comin' over, or what?"

"Said he was. I'm sure he's not here in half an hour or so. Which gives me time to show you fuanos my latest mind attack. Check it out." He unfurled a large poster of a huge, rakish motor yacht. "It's a San Lorenzo, three years old. Twin diesels, 2250 horse each. Cruises at 26 knots. I own it, or the company does."

"Chick-awn SHIT!" cried Sundance.

"It's in Hong Kong right now. The guys in L. A. are putting a crew together to fly over there and set a studio up, TV as well as radio. In, say, four weeks it'll be ready. We're goin' off road, on water. We cruise the effin' world, is what we do. We may be doing the show at three in the morning, depending on where we are, but - care about it."

"Attacks." Said Aranzubia. "Have those amazing mind attacks. How much did the bad boy cost?"

"It's called the Kat House, and it ran me twelve million. Or the company. Another half a million for renovation and the studio."

Aranzubia whistled lowly, shaking his head. "Chicken shit," he said softly.

"We fly to Hong Kong in a month and head in to the South China Sea. All we gotta do is figure out if we hang a left or right. I think we take a right, follow the sun. First port is probably Bangkok."

Grossberg emitted a low growl, drained his mug of beer, and whispered, "Chicken shit."

"Crew?" asked Aranzubia. "Need captain, mechanic....what?"

"Cap'n Kat, Zube. Mechanic, for sure. The rest, I don't know. We'll figure it out."

"Time?" asked Sundance.

"We're talkin' circumnavigation, gentlemen, and taking our own sweet time. I'm thinking a couple years."

"I read some stuff about the South China Sea," said Sundance. "I'm sure there's not pirates and shit."

"Could," replied Kat.

"So what do we do?" asked Sundance. "We all gonna have bows and arrows?"

"Between us?" asked Kat, glancing at each of them. They all nodded. "Two water cooled thirty caliber machine guns, can be mounted fore and aft. Some M-16's, B. A. R.'s."

"Finer," said Grossberg. "I'm sure we don't have to be able to shoot all that stuff. Practice. I never fired a machine gun."

"You're right," said Kat.

Sundance answered a knock on the door, and admitted Mercurieff, who shook hands all around.

"Just cracked a fresh keg, Bud," said Kat. "Care to join us?"

"Yeah, what the hell. I'm played out. And the next couple days, I'm sort of out of the loop anyway."

Grossberg handed him a frosted, foaming mug. "Thanks, Gil," he said.

"No problem. Say, Kat, me and the Kid figured we'd go into town, check things out. And talk about your mind attack, while we're at it."

"Boss," Kat replied. "Going to some titty bar, is what you're checking out. Later."

After they left, Bud said, "I didn't run them off, did I?"

"No attacks," said Kat. "They had a hard week. They need to unwind. I'm sure it wasn't pretty hectic, moving every day, all the driving."

"I'm here to tell you, Kat, Zubie, you guys have had a hell of an impact. I ran into one of the Magnificent Seven, I know the guy. And he says, 'Bud, can you call him off? Get the Katman off our backs? He's killing us.' And I say, 'There's nothing I can do. The crazy son of a bitch is out of control.'"

They all laughed, and Mercurieff continued, "Seriously, though, what you've done, you're doing, to those Texas sellouts is important. It shows everyone what could be in store for them if they jump ship. It's great."

"Boss," said Kat. "Then we'll keep it up. We're working on a new bit, this weekend. Goes to the tune of The Yellow Rose of Texas. Pretty nasty."

Aranzobia asked, "The Collins interview, how did that play?"

"Very well. Very, very well indeed. The single most effective thing we've done, so far. In more ways than one."

"What do you mean?" asked Kat.

"Well, everyone believes him, of course, so everyone has a sense of how bad things have gotten around here. Mainly, though, is that after that interview, all the rumors about

bribery dried up. We thought there may have been half a dozen deals in the works, before. Now, none. We scared them off. We think. I'm going to grab another beer, catch up with you guys."

"I'm sure you're not in a finer mood. We figured you'd be all pissed off, with that Supreme Court ruling yesterday."

Bud took a long sip and laughed lowly. "Didn't piss me off at all, as a matter of fact. Amazed me, yeah. Totally amazing."

"But I'm sure it's not a bullshit decision, right?" asked Aranzubia.

"For sure, Zube. It's total bullshit. They say they don't think it's fair that the residents of D. C. aren't represented in this vote, so they decided to give them one. And one for Lachey, of course, though I'm sure that thought never crossed their minds."

"But wait" said Aranzubia. "We've been told, all along, that the vote in the House would be tight, and that one extra vote, for D. C., could decide the election. Is that not true?"

"Sure, it is."

"Then how come you're not pissed off?"

"Because I'm not at all sure D. C.'s going to get its vote."

Kat pointed to the television set in the corner. "But, Bud, wait. Thirty minutes ago the Speaker recognized the D. C. delegate on the floor, and announced she will be voting tonight, for President."

"Yeah, but this vote tonight, it's just for show. Everybody votes the way their state voted, nobody gets to 26, or even close. Then they come back tomorrow, whenever, and the real voting starts. Just look at Moore, up there on the podium. What an asshole. I guess I can have one more."

"I still don't get it, Bud," said Aranzubia, as Mercurieff refilled his mug. "D. C.'s voting. It's a done deal."

"Not necessarily. When the real voting starts, next ballot, things may change."

"How?"

"The House decides this ruling is bullshit and tells the Supreme Court to go to hell."

"Chicken shit!" said Aranzubia.

"They could do that?" asked Kat.

"Sure they could. What's the Court going to do? Hold the House of Representatives in contempt? Send over some U. S. Marshalls to force the House to do its bidding? I don't think so. I'm actually glad, in a way, about this ruling. It gives Congress a way to put the Supreme Court in its place. They need to get knocked down a peg or two."

"You think the House might actually do that?" asked Aranzubia.

"Be surprised if it didn't."

"Boss! Screw the Supreme Court. I love it. Hey, Bud, you hungry? Feel like some pizza? They deliver."

"I could use a bite."

"What do you like?"

"Everything but green peppers and anchovies."

"Finer. Zube, you mind calling in for a couple specials?"

"Ah, I'm sure I don't."

Kat unfurled the poster of the Kat House and showed it to Merculieff. "Check it out."

"What the hell! Christ, how big is that thing?"

"175 feet. Twin 2250 horse diesels. Goes 26 knots."

"What, you're gonna charter it or something?"

"I own it. As of yesterday. We're fitting it out with a studio, just like this one. We're going around the world. We'll broadcast from wherever we are, like we do now."

"God damn, Kat. That's a hell of a deal. I'm shocked. And maybe a little jealous, too."

"Plenty of room aboard, you and Pattie want to join us for a while. You could help skipper it. You used to go out, fishing, in Bristol Bay, when you were a kid, right?"

"Yeah, I did. They never let me take the wheel, though. Wow. Maybe there's a way, if you're serious."

"As a heart attack. Right, Zubie?"

"It would be extra fine."

"We could have some more excellent adventures. Fishing. Hunting."

"Like Kodiak."

"Yeah, like Kodiak."

On the morning of the fifth day, everything was perfect. To kill a brown bear with bow and arrow, everything had to be perfect.

The first two days there was too much wind. Even though Kat's arrow would fly no more than 40 yards, the shot had to be precise, and a breeze over five miles an hour would affect its flight. The target would be the bear's heart, two inches above the bottom of its chest.

If the arrow went home, properly, death would be almost instantaneous. But if the shot were off, just a little, it would have no effect on the beast's ability to charge.

And charge it would. The motion involved in delivering the arrow would almost certainly locate its tormentors for the wounded bear. Vicious and evil tempered to begin with, once attacked, the bear would try to kill its hunters.

Merculieff would back Kat up with a bolt action .458 Winchester magnum. It was the ideal brown bear weapon, borrowed from a retired guide. This particular model was especially prized, since it was manufactured before 1964, and thus had the highly reliable claw extractor. If Bud needed a second shot, their lives could depend on his ability to eject the first shell and quickly insert another. The bullet would weigh 510 grains. Chances were good Bud would be shooting through alder bushes, and the heavy round would not easily be deflected. Merculieff had never killed a bear, and hoped to keep it that way. The hunt was Kat's, a trophy hunt. Bud had no desire for trophies, but had no problem with those who did. It was not an insignificant industry on Kodiak. And there was a surplus of prey.

Trophy hunters desired only the largest possible animals – the old boars. As it happened, 70 years of game management on Kodiak had shown that aggressive culling of these brutes actually increased the overall population. A principal cause of mortality in cubs was the injuries they received as bystanders to the battles over a sow in heat. Another cause of cub death made the killing of the old boars even less objectionable. Sows would not go into

heat while raising their cubs. So in order to make a sow receptive to his advances, the old boars would kill the cubs.

At 4:00 a.m. Bud woke to the tinkle of his wrist watch alarm in their cramped pup tent. He lay motionless, and listened. Not a breath of wind, no rain. He squirmed to the tent's flap, poked his head out and looked at the sky. Stars! The clouds had lifted, and when the moon rose in a few minutes its light would allow them to find their way to their ambush site in stealth.

Silence was essential. The old guide explained it to them when they went to pick up his rifle. In country, you are in the domain of the bear. From the moment you arrive, every minute of the day, act as though you were a burglar, at night, in another man's home.

The regulations of the Alaska Board of Fish and Game require every grizzly or brown bear hunt to be conducted under the direction of a licensed guide. At Kat's insistence, Bud had pulled some strings at the Board. He had been issued a special, temporary guide's license, for this hunt only. This was unprecedented, and highly irregular, but everyone in the big game hunting community in Alaska viewed Mercurieff as their most effective protector and champion, and they all agreed to just look the other way.

"Kat," Bud said softly, shaking his shoulder, "it's time. Things look good."

Kat shook his head, propped himself on his elbows, and listened. "No wind," he said, in a voice just above a whisper.

"No clouds, either. Moon's up in half an hour. Couldn't be better."

Their sole indulgence would be a cup of hot coffee. Bud heated the water on a tiny burner inside the tent while Kat relieved himself. Breakfast was smoked salmon and dried fruit. They ate and drank in silence, then pulled on their hip boots and donned camouflaged, hooded rain jackets. With a small flashlight Bud checked the contents of his pack board. Rope, candy bars, tightly sealed beef jerky, full canteen, toilet paper, skinning knife, camera, first aid kit, flares, cell phone. Out of habit, Bud partially opened the chamber of his rifle, saw the cartridge in place, bolted it home, and flipped the safety switch to on. He leaned it against a tree, and tried to work the stiffness out of his joints with squats and stretches.

Inside the tent Kat methodically tuned his custom made two cam compound bow. Only three and a half feet in length, axle and axle, it would require Kat to exert 75 pounds of pressure to reach its full draw length of 31 inches. His arrowheads were so finely honed they needed to be handled with caution, lest he slice up his hands. They were carbon, with titanium ferrules, and razor sharp 450 grain broadheads.

When the half-moon peeped over the ridge on the west of the valley Bud checked his watch. If it read 4:27 it was working properly, and it was. Soundlessly, they waited until the half orb was fully up. Then they nodded at one another, and set off. With the rifle, Bud would take the lead.

It would take them an hour to travel the mile and a half between camp and the salmon stream where they would sit in wait for their prey. They had travelled this route the four previous days, back and forth, and their familiarity let them move quietly. On the first day they had hacked a path through some particularly dense alder thickets with a machete, and this eased their journey this morning. The moonlight made their principle goal – silence – much easier. Nonetheless they took great care, with every step, of avoiding any sound whatsoever.

Because of its short effective range, a bow made a bear hunt especially challenging. Stalking the animal was impossible. His hearing was keen, and the noise necessarily involved in getting inside 40 yards was certain to spook him. Unless that noise was drowned by the wind. But a wind strong enough to cover an approach was too strong to shoot in.

The only effective way to bow hunt brown bear was to lie in wait, and let the bear come, downwind, to you.

Since the heavy breeze of the first two days made actual hunting impractical, Kat and Bud had used the time to scout out the perfect blind. It was mid-September, and the small stream was teeming with spawning sockeye salmon. Late in the afternoon of the first day they discovered the fishing hole favored by a huge boar, judging by its tracks. Half eaten salmon carcasses littered the gravel near the northern bank. On the opposite, southern side of the stream an easily discernible trail led across fifty yards of soggy tundra covered with waist high grass. The tundra ended at a slightly elevated patch of thick alder. The prevailing breeze in this part of the valley was southerly. When fully gorged, the bear was crossing the river, with the wind at his back, walking across the tundra, into the alder, and then off to his lair.

On the afternoon of the second day they returned, and found fresh tracks. They went into the alder and spent two hours selecting the best possible location for their ambush. It was twenty-five yards from the bear's trail, and five feet above it. They hacked out from the alder a perfect shooting lane for Kat. After he released, he would duck aside, to give Bud a clear shot, if one was necessary.

On both the third and fourth days they had arrived at the site at five-thirty in the morning, and sat silently until after noon. Both days they went to the river and found no fresh sign at all. For whatever reason, the bear had not returned.

At five twenty-five they arrived at their now familiar perch, and seated themselves for the long wait. A slight breeze from the south brought the rippling sound of the river to their ears, and the stench of rotting salmon to their noses. As they settled in Kat slipped a Bandit – a small pouch of smokeless tobacco – into his mouth.

A little after six the eastern horizon began to lighten, the stars began to fade. This was feeding time for the big boars of Kodiak. Sows and cubs would feed at any time of the day, but the adult males preferred early dawn.

At first light a noisy flock of seagulls arrived and began feeding on the rotting flesh of dead salmon, swept down from their spawning grounds upstream. Minutes later a couple big, coal black ravens arrived for their share.

Bud smelled him first. Brown bear stink in all seasons, but especially when feeding on salmon. The foul, musky odor was unmistakable. He turned to Kat, pointed to his nose, and inhaled, then nodded. Kat inhaled deeply, smiled, and nodded in return. Both of their heart rates increased twenty beats a minute.

Soon they could hear him splashing in the river, fishing. After five minutes he stopped, apparently having made a catch. A bit later he seagulls took flight, screeching angrily. Their presence must have annoyed the bear, who ran them off. The ravens left soon after. Brownies don't like company, and are very easily annoyed.

For an hour and a half they listened as the bear fished, ate, and fished some more. At 7:45 ten minutes had gone by without the sound of splashing water. The bear, it seemed, was full. They both peered intently across the tundra to the river's edge.

Kat saw his movement first. The tall grass snapped aside his path. Seconds later they saw his ears, then his head. He was blonde, not brown, and he was absolutely enormous. And he was headed right at them.

Kat nocked his arrow and visualized himself drawing, aiming just above the rib cage, and releasing. According to plan, his one chance for a clear shot would be when the bear emerged from the grass, just before entering the alder. When his right front leg was extended forward, the right side of his chest would be exposed. Even if Kat missed the heart, from this shooting angle it was possible the arrow could traverse the right lung all the way into the left. A killing shot, though not immediate.

Bud switched off the safety, his heart racing. I'm not entirely sure I really want to be here, he thought.

In moments the massive animal was half way across the tundra, thirty-five yards away. He stopped suddenly, sensing something. He slowly rose on his hind legs, showing his shoulders, arms, claws, and chest. He peered into the alder, left to right, until his gaze settled directly on Kat.

At that very instant Kat turned sideways, pulled back on his bow, aimed, and released. The arrow flashed and in a third of a second plunged into the great bear's chest, five inches above the bottom of his rib cage.

He shook his head and shoulders and bellowed in rage. Kat hunched down while Bud rammed the rifle's stock against his shoulder, sighted in just below the arrow and fired. The ear splitting boom from the percussion momentarily stunned Mercurieff. Recovering, he could see he had missed, high and right. The round caught the bear below the left shoulder, spinning it around and knocking it to the ground. Now the animal's bellow of agony increased, as it rolled in the grass. Bud pulled back on the bolt, and as the expended cartridge tumbled in the air the bear charged. He rammed the new round in, shouldered his weapon and pointed it at the bear, now just fifteen yards off and closing fast. He aimed just below its jaw, hoping to hit it in the windpipe and break its neck. Again he was wide right. But the bear's forelegs folded, and it half somersaulted to a halt, rolling on to its side. Bud's last shot had shattered its left shoulder, crippling it, but it was not dead. It continued to roar in rage and pain, blood seeping from its wounds and pouring from its mouth. Bud bolted home a third round and circled around the writhing, groaning animal until he had a clear view of its chest. The bear looked directly at him, its yellow eyes burning in hatred. Taking careful aim, and waiting until the bear had come to rest, he shot exactly three inches below the still protruding arrow, bursting its heart. The bear twitched once, and was still.

Kat walked out from the alder and stood at Bud's side as they looked down at the great golden brute. Ferocious and foul tempered, true, but also a magnificent, beautiful animal.

This will be my last, Bud thought. He looked over to Kat, who was breathing heavily. Kat looked back and said, "We got him." A pause. "You got him."

"We got him, together, and he's your bear. Let's leave it there."

"Chicken shit. O.K., Bud, whatever you say. My God, what an animal."

"We'll measure him out, but he's got to be ten feet, anyway. 1200 pounds, I'll bet." He turned to Kat and extended his trembling hand. "Congratulations, Katman. This time, the bear didn't get you. This time, you got the bear."

Kat looked into his beer for a few moments, then to Mercurieff. "You know, I'm seeing Melanie and my boy tomorrow night."

"How's she doing? You know, I've never actually met her. Or your son."

"She seems to be doing pretty good. The last couple of times I've talked to her we get along – better than any time since the divorce. My boy misses me, I know."

"How old is he now?"

"Eleven."

"A great age to see the world," said Aranzubia. "With his dad, and mom. On a big yacht, say. Cruising around the world. The adventure of a lifetime. And very educational."

Kat looked at Bud, then Aranzubia. "Could."

"Chicken shit," said Aranzubia.

"A hell of a plan," said Bud.

"I'm going to tell Melanie about the cruise, when I see her tomorrow. I'll hint around about what a great opportunity it would be for George, education-wise."

"You sly dog," said Aranzubia. "Set that bait. A regular honey trap. What if she doesn't bite?"

"I get six weeks visitation this summer. So George will have that much time on the Kat House, at least. He'll have such a great time, for sure, maybe it gets his mom thinking. I'm still working it all out."

Aranzubia refilled his mug, took a sip, and looked from Mercurieff to Kat. Normally he wouldn't talk business in front of an outsider, but Bud was different. "This has nothing to do with your family, Kat, believe me. But even before this boat mind attack came up, I gotta tell ya, I've pretty much decided to bail. You know I've stayed in touch with Jennifer, back in Denver."

"Oh, yeah. You guys e-mail each other all the time, I know that. You're serious about her."

"Yup. The station she works at is coming up for sale. I think I'm going to buy it, move back there, set up house."

"Chicken shit!" said Kat. "You talk about mind attacks! Great way to get a babe. If you're not her boss, you buy the company she works for, so you are her boss, then make your move. Only a Mexican would come up with an idea like that."

Saturday, January 13th

Vice President Lem Tarpley was 50, tall and Hollywood handsome, his dark blue eyes contrasting pleasantly with his tanned face and still golden and stylized hair. His political, and legal, philosophy was simple: redistribute the wealth. Take from the rich, give to the poor, and get rich in the process. He had been lead counsel in dozens of class action lawsuits, culminating in a case which bankrupted a major pharmaceutical company.

His personal fortune elevated him to the Vice Presidency four years ago. Ferdinand Lachey came from the far left wing of his party, and had no personal fortune. He was backed financially by the entertainment industry, labor, and the trial lawyers, but he needed more. As a candidate for Vice President, Tarpley would be free spend his own money on the campaign. His pledge to Lachey to spend \$100 million of it got him on the ticket.

Bald and bearded, private investigator Greg Palamountain hit the play button on a DVD player, and an image of a hotel room came on the screen. A pale man in his mid to late thirties was having sex with a young dark skinned boy. As the disc played, and the minutes passed, the burly Palamountain thought, how much does he need to see? Out of professional necessity he had viewed it several times, but there was no point in Tarpley seeing it at all.

"It goes on, more of the same," he said. "Toward the end, you get a better view of the boy's face, can see how young he is. This was in Puerto Rico, about a year ago. The Congressman was on a junket."

"What's he looking at, if this got out, and he was charged?"

"He'd probably wind up doing three years or so. And in the jails of Puerto Rico, like everywhere else, child molesters are not popular. It'd be hard time."

"Where'd you get this thing?"

"From an associate. I've got it on consignment, like."

"What's he want?"

"A hundred grand. He gets the money, he destroys his copy."

"And if he doesn't?"

"I bust his balls. Seen enough?"

"Yeah."

"So, tomorrow morning, a copy is delivered, with a note telling him that none of this sees the light of day, if, for one week, he does as he's told."

Tarpley laughed lowly, "He's got no choice."

"By the way, what's going on in the House? They were supposed to be voting by now."

"Interesting that you should ask. I have the 'inside dope'. I did a little experiment a little earlier. I called Mercurieff, using one of the methods his man – what's he called?"

"McConkey."

"Right, McConkey gave us. I got through and we had a nice talk. So warm, so friendly. Hah! In any event, he tells me what's going on in the House is a coup."

"You're kidding."

"Not at all. Tommy Ledoux and three other Democrats are joining the Republicans and the so called Tea Party people in forming a new majority, with Ledoux as Speaker. As you might imagine, Speaker Moore is not taking it well. For the next 48 hours or so, much sturm and drang at the other end of the building."

"So how does this play out?"

"Quite well, actually. My new friend explained it all to me. They've been planning this coup for months, ever since the election. Their tactical goal is delay. Rather clever, I must admit. By creating this turmoil, at this time, they're putting off the second vote for at least two days. And we are now at the point where every day is of critical importance."

"Let me guess. They're using the Supreme Court ruling, giving D. C. a vote, and Moore's acceptance of it, as the pretext for the coup."

"Very good, Greg. Yes, that's the peg they're hanging it on. Pure crap, of course. This coup was coming, regardless. Unwittingly, the Supreme Court did them two favors. By taking up the case, and delaying a decision, the Court gave them ten days. And the decision gave

them an excuse for a coup. Mercurieff actually said to me, 'Thank god for the Supreme Court.' But enough of this. Tell me what you've got on Binkley."

Sunday, January 14th

Bud and Pattie sat side by side, facing their screen, and the image of their nineteen year old son, John. This was a Sunday ritual, and John, who was a good natured young man, patiently told them of the week's events at the Air Force Academy. This week he was a bit short, though, since he had some questions for his father.

"So, Dad, can you fill me in on what's going on back there?"

"A coup is underway in the House. My friend Tommy Ledoux is going to be the new Speaker. The voting in the House for President is being delayed until Wednesday, probably. If no one gets 26 states there will be another vote Thursday, and again on Friday, if necessary."

"O. K.," said John. "And if no one gets 26 states on Friday, what happens?"

"Then at noon on Saturday there will be a vacancy in the Presidency. Saturday morning the Senate will elect the new Vice President, either me or Tarpley. Whoever wins will become President."

"This is what my friends have been talking about out here. Some of them say you planned the whole thing, set it all up so you can become President. Is that true?"

"The plan was to let Lachey and Downey tear each other up, and have McNamara as the out. When we lost Texas the chance of that actually happening became pretty remote. So it looks as though I'm going to be the alternative to Lachey and Downey, not McNamara."

"Wait a minute," said Pattie. "When did you lose Texas?"

"Let's see. That was on the fifth, nine days ago."

"And for the last nine days you've been working on becoming President yourself?"

"Well, yeah, pretty much."

Pattie was visibly upset. "My God, Bud, how can you have kept me, kept us, in the dark about this?"

Bud shrugged his shoulders. "Well...."

"You think you can actually pull this off?" asked John.

"We've got a shot. With Tommy as Speaker, we just might do it."

"Jeez, Dad. You told us, right after the election, that this was some kind of theoretical possibility, but now it sounds like.... Man, oh man, this is pretty unbelievable."

"Do you mean to tell me I could be First Lady, and we live in the White House, and the kids have Secret Service following them everywhere?"

"It could happen."

"We have to tell Jackie about this. I'm sure she'll be thrilled. She's a freshman in college, living in a dorm, just getting herself acquainted with everyone, and now this?"

Bud could feel a storm coming on.

"And what about Coke?" she asked. "How does he feel about all this?"

Pattie had developed a great respect for Coke McNamara, and had a close relationship with his wife. She was not particularly interested in most political issues, but she had great people sense, and he was one of her favorites.

"Coke's known all along this could happen. He doesn't like it, but he accepts reality. And the reality is that I've got a shot at this, in the Senate, and he really doesn't."

"Is this like a secret, or something?" asked John.

"Not really. Once Tommy becomes Speaker, and no one gets 26 on the second vote on Wednesday, which is what we expect, then people will start speculating. But remember, both Lachey and Downey have enormous resources at their disposal, and each of them has every intention of winning this thing. Lachey is President, the head of the Democratic Party, and still has 216 Democrats in the House. Downey has all the machinery of the Republican Party, and most of the big corporations, and 202 Republicans in the House. Tommy and I have the Speakership, and a dozen or so votes in the House. So the odds are stacked against us."

John shook his head. "I guess I'd feel better about all this if you'd given us more of a heads up about it."

"You can say that again!" said Pattie emphatically.

"You know me. I don't like talking about things I'm going to do. I just talk about things I've done."

"Well, you and I certainly have a few things to talk about, Bud. Things that our son doesn't have to hear about. I think we should sign off with John and get started."

Bud agreed, said goodbye to his son, and girded himself for a long and difficult conversation.

Monday, January 15th

Seated with his three fellow renegades in a corner of the House chambers, Tommy Ledoux tried to recall another occasion when the tension on the floor approached the level of this evening. Nothing quite compared with it. The immediate, personal political future of each of the 435 members was at stake. He could almost feel, physically, the hatred directed at the four of them.

Without them, Speaker Moore had only 216 votes, two shy of a majority. With the votes of the Republicans, the Tea Party, and his three Democratic co-conspirators, soon-to-be Speaker of the House Tommy Ledoux had one to spare.

His spare vote, and weak link, Ted Cheever of California, sat immediately to his left. He came from the 21st district in the agrarian San Joaquin Valley, and was in his fourth term. At 39, he was a fading political wunderkind, frustrated in his ambition to become part of the leadership. Two years ago Moore had promised his support for Cheever's bid for Assistant Whip. At the last minute Moore had been forced to reverse himself, dashing the Californian's chances. Then he lied about it.

Cheever's wild reaction to this treachery ruined any hope of reversing it. The price of his vote for Ledoux was chairmanship of the Agriculture Committee. He would switch parties, and become a Republican. As chair, for one term, at least, of an important committee, he would extort millions of campaign dollars from agricultural interests from all over the country. Back in his district, local Republicans had pledged support. He was acting, he assured them, entirely from principle.

To Cheever's left was 76 year old Carl Simmons of western Pennsylvania, ranking Democrat on the Ways and Means Committee. For 34 years he had built seniority, waiting for his turn as Chair. But a powerful bloc in the Democratic caucus had forced Moore to pass him over in favor of a more, liberal, vigorous, and marginally less corrupt African-American from New

York City. This burning humiliation glowed like a hot coal within him. Under Ledoux, the chairmanship he had coveted for so many years would be his. As long as he held it, he would flood his district with grants, projects, and jobs programs. For two years he would be in a position to revenge himself on those Democrats who tried to deny him his prize. Many of them were in the chambers at that moment, eyeing him with contempt. He glared back, a smile crossed his face, and he licked his lips. A groan of pleasure rumbled deep in his chest. Just wait, you sorry bastards, just wait.

On Ledoux's right sat Mike Mathews, his fellow Louisianan. He would chair the Rules Committee, where he would quietly do as he was told. Since his district leaned Democratic, his political survival was most at risk. It was a fact he accepted stoically. Better to be out of office than behind bars, where Ledoux could put him.

Two days ago, on Saturday, Speaker Moore got wind of the plot, and cancelled the second Presidential ballot to give himself time to turn the two votes he needed. Every conceivable threat, bribe, and argument had been tried against the four of them. Nothing worked, and nothing would. President Lachey, Speaker Moore, and all their allies tried the same tactics on the eleven Tea Party members with no greater success. Under the firm hand of Muldoon they held fast. Their last hope was to pick off a couple Republicans, but those efforts were futile as well. Governor Downey and the entire Republican establishment managed to hold them all together.

Public pressure mounted on Moore to reconvene the House, regardless of the consequence to his Speakership. Only five days remained in Lachey's term, and the House must choose the President in that time.

It was now 6:30, ninety minutes past the hour set for today's session. Muldoon was closeted off the floor with his Tea Party caucus, physically preventing any further attempt at their votes. He would bring them to the floor for the vote dethroning Moore, and not before.

"Why now, Tommy?" asked Cheever. "Damn it, we could've done this before we convened. A coup is a messy business. Could've been avoided, it seems to me."

"We had to wait," Ledoux lied. Cheever was right. Ledoux could have lined up his votes two weeks ago, when the House was organizing. But that would not have served his primary, hidden agenda. "We needed the D. C. ruling, and Moore's acceptance of it, as a trigger. We weren't strong enough before that."

Bob Parenti and Ben Grussendorf, Majority Leader and Whip, respectively, emerged from the door at the rear of the podium and walked over to Ledoux and his group. The 150 members milling about the hall gradually halted their conversations and turned to watch.

More importantly the TV cameras focused in. The cable news networks interrupted their chattering panels of experts to broadcast the meeting live.

This was why Ledoux had the four of them on the floor. He knew they would make another run at him. He wanted it done in public.

Aware of the television cameras, Parenti suppressed the anger boiling within him. "Tommy, gentlemen. The Speaker would like a final word with you."

Ledoux wanted to laugh out loud, but restrained himself. This was a most encouraging development. Moore's top lieutenants were coming for him. That meant their efforts at getting to the Tea Party members and the Republicans had failed. They were desperate. "We're through talking. We're coming up on two hours since we were scheduled to go back into session. Time to go, Bob, time to get it on. Moore wants to talk to us, here we are. Come on down. But no more cuttin' bait, huh? Let's fish."

Parenti's temper was starting to get the better of him, so Grussendorf said, "Come on, Tommy. Let's be reasonable here. There's the dignity of the office."

"The answer's no, Ben. Let's move on."

Parenti glared at Ledoux, his face beet red. Tommy stood up, and said, "You should preside, Mario, not Moore. For the dignity of the office. It's gonna be humiliatin' if the Speaker is overruled, to his face. But that's your choice. The clock is tickin'. You all've wasted two days now. We got five days to go, and we've got to start votin'"

Parenti looked at Cheever, then Simmons, then Mathews, and back at Ledoux. "You're going to regret this, you're going to pay, all of you. That's not a threat, it's a promise."

"My, my," said Ledoux calmly. "My hands are shakin' and my knees are weak. Ah'm all shook up. You been around a while, Parenti. Should know better than makin' promises you can't keep. Tell Moore to man up and get his sorry ass out here. The longer he waits the weaker he looks. Let's do it."

At 8:30 a subdued and frowning Speaker of the House mounted the massive podium at the southern end of the floor, rapped the giant gavel one time, and declared tonelessly, "The House will come to order."

The vast room resembled a large theater, with the triple tiered podium in the place of a stage. The galleries overhanging the floor were packed, but less than half the members were seated in the banks of dark brown wooden benches which radiated out from the

podium. All the networks were now offering continuous live coverage of the session, normally a guarantee of full attendance. But the 204 Republicans and eleven Tea Party members had waited Moore out in caucus. Within minutes of Moore's appearance, they began streaming onto the floor. At 8:45 the chamber was full.

Moore tapped the gavel a last time, repeating, "The House will come to order." As the room quieted, Moore looked ruefully from one side of the hall to the other, and back again. His reign as Speaker had lasted twelve days. And there, below and to his left, sat the architect of his fall – Tommy Ledoux. They stared at each other without expression for a full, long twenty seconds. Finally he declared the House in order, announced his approval of the Journal of the last day's sitting, and led the House in the Pledge of Allegiance.

In order to preserve decorum it had been arranged that Minority Leader Riddick would make the motion which would formally mark the end of Moore's command of a majority. Standing at one of the leadership benches three rows back from the podium, Riddick said into his microphone, "Mr. Speaker."

"The gentleman from Michigan is recognized."

"Mr. Speaker, I move that the ruling of the chair in the previous session, with respect to the vote of the District of Columbia, be overturned. I request a roll call vote. By unanimous consent, I request an immediate vote, without debate."

"Hearing no objection, the members may proceed to vote. A yes vote is to overturn the chair. A no vote sustains the chair."

Electronic voting stations were distributed throughout the floor. Each member had a plastic card identifying themselves which was inserted in the machine. The member then punched one of three buttons, for yes, no, or abstain. Above the podium a giant screen showed the names of all 435 members. As they cast their votes, a green, red, or amber light appeared next to their name, indicating how they had voted. A running total appeared at the bottom of the screen.

To informed observers the votes of individual members were more important than the running total. As the fifteen minute voting period wore on, the vote was holding true to form. All the Republicans and Tea Party independents had green lights next to their names. As did, one after another, the Democrats Ledoux, Mathews, Cheever and Simmons.

Joanna Krueger inserted her card, hit the green button, removed the card, and turned to her closest friend in the House, 65 year old Marsha Kaminski of Colorado. "It doesn't make sense, Marsha. Why they waited."

"I know. There was a reason Ledoux held off."

"Just to humiliate Moore?"

"No, that's not it. Somehow, it helps McNamara."

"You still split in Colorado?"

"No, they got to Cummings this afternoon. He's switching to Downey."

"That's it, for him, politically, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is," said Kaminski. "I've heard his brother becomes a federal judge, or Cummings himself is hired at an exorbitant salary by one of our oil companies, or some family property is purchased for a million dollars more than it's worth. Knowing Cummings, it's probably all three."

The fifteen minutes was up, and the vote was 219 yes, 216 no. All the rest was mere formality. Tomorrow a new election for Speaker would be held, and Ledoux would win with the same vote.

Watching from his office with a few staffers, Mercurieff yelled at his television, "Yeah, Tommy!" He went to a refrigerator, grabbed a beer, opened it, and tipped it at the image of the soon to be Speaker on his screen. He took a swig, and said, laughing, "Tommy Ledoux.....has done a coup."

Tuesday, January 16th

At 9:00 in the evening Mercurieff was alone in his office, wrapping up another long day. He was watching news accounts of the coup, clicking from channel to channel. Because of continuing delaying tactics by Moore, Ledoux had not been formally elected as Speaker until three that afternoon. Four hours later he held a press conference with new Majority Leader Riddick and Tea Party caucus leader Muldoon. They justified the coup as a protest against Moore's willingness to be dictated to by the Supreme Court, specifically, on the issue of a vote for the District of Columbia. The reporters didn't buy it, and the tone and substance of their questions ranged from skeptical to hostile. Ledoux was at his best, refusing to be baited.

He clicked over to CBS, and listened to their analysis. The coup was described as a devastating blow to the Lachey forces. They got that part right, he thought. His videophone dinged, and he identified the caller. It was himself, Broderick Downey, on the line. He took the call.

Downey was beaming. Seated behind his desk, he wore a white dress shirt, tieless, its sleeves rolled up to his elbows. "Senator!" he exclaimed. "And how do I find you this fine evening?"

"Governor! Good, fine. Better than Lachey, that's for sure."

Downey leaned back his head and laughed out loud. "Isn't that the truth? Ah, yes. Having Moore in the chair was a great advantage to him. And now we have your friend and ally, Tommy Ledoux, Speaker of the House. Before we go any further, you're fully encrypted at your end, I presume."

"Of course."

"Can we agree not to record our conversation?"

"Agreed." The recording of private videophone conversations was considered bad form. It was also commonplace. Mercurieff would not record the call. Downey would, for sure.

"Can we speak off the record, just between us?"

"No problem." Bud knew that Bickford, off camera, was sitting in on the conversation. He didn't care.

"Senator – may I call you Bud?"

"Certainly."

"And I'm Brod, to my friends, if you please. Bud, since word of the coup broke on Saturday, a lot has happened. In all candor, a few days ago it was close, between me and Lachey. But the coup has taken all the wind out of his sails. It's all moving in my direction now. As they say, the train is leaving the station, and people are clambering aboard. By tomorrow, or Thursday at the latest, I'm quite confident I'll have 26, or even more. Which leads me to you, as my Vice President. We're both Republicans, after all, and we could make a good team. You could be given a variety of responsibilities, in areas of your particular interest."

Right, thought Bud, like going to dirt naps and doing hug duty at minor disasters.

"I hate to say this, Bud, but I'm being told there could be a problem for you in the Senate. You've only got 52 Republicans in your majority, and three of them may go to Tarpley. We can't have that. Tarpley, a communist practically, as my Vice President? No, no. That won't do."

"Who are the three?"

"Inadomi, Binkley, and Jared."

"Hmm." Downey might actually be on to something. They were the three most liberal Republicans in the Senate, and Bud did not have good relations with any of them. But what could Tarpley offer them to justify breaking with their party?

"I might be able to help with Jared and Binkley. I've heard they are so opposed to your, let's say, uncompromising positions, especially on gun control and the environment, that they can't support you."

Like all Alaska politicians of every political party, Merculieff was a staunch opponent of gun control. He also forcefully advocated opening up federal lands in his state to resource development – anathema to the environmental community. They would have some political cover if they refused to vote for Merculieff.

"I'll need to talk to them. I appreciate the heads up."

"I'm offering more than that, Bud. I have friends in the business community, people who have influence with them. And I could appeal to them, as President, that I be given my choice for the number two spot – you."

"Brod, before you go any further, I need to make myself plain. I'm supporting McNamara, all the way. To the bitter end. Nothing will change that."

Downey shook his head. "It's me or Lachey, Bud. And you know that. But I respect your loyalty, I really do. It's what I expected. So this is all I'm asking. I am very confident I'll have the votes. However, at some stage of the process my people may need a little help from the chair. Riddick is on point for me on the House floor. If he needs a ruling, or a motion or recess, I'd like you to ask Ledoux to give it to him. It wouldn't be disloyal to McNamara. Just a courtesy, is all. Realistically, I'm the only one who stands between Lachey and another term. It's me or him, period. And I know damn well how you and Ledoux feel about Lachey. I'm not asking a lot."

"I'll tell you what. I'll take it up with Tommy. We'll see what we can do."

"Excellent. When the two of you have had a chance to talk, get back to me. If we can work together on this, it's a good sign of more ahead. Let's stay in touch."

"For sure. Good night, Brod."

Downey had something on Binkley and Jared, and was using their votes to leverage him. There was nothing, at this point, he could do about that. Inadomi was probably gone. He had always doubted he would get that vote. There were half a dozen moderate Democrats in the Senate, people he had worked closely with on various issues. He'd call them in the morning.

For the past two weeks he had been so intent on the vote in the House that he had neglected the Senate. That would change, tomorrow.

Wednesday, January 17th

Part of the price of Muldoon's cooperation in the coup which made Ledoux Speaker was bringing him in to the broader plot with Mercurieff. Despite his trust and respect for him, Bud had only agreed reluctantly. Each addition to the inner circle increased the chance of a leak.

It turned out to be a smart move. Muldoon was now acting as Ledoux's informal majority leader, attending to the constant turf battles within their 219 member three party coalition. The titular Majority Leader, Riddick, was a dedicated Downey man, and couldn't be trusted. Fights were erupting over committee assignments, and chairmanships, staffing and budgets, and office space. Ledoux was overwhelmed, and without Muldoon's help he would have been unable to function.

While the first, formal vote five days ago, on Friday, had been largely meaningless, the second vote, taken earlier in the day, was a true reading of the situation. All 435 members had made commitments to one of the three camps, and today's vote showed which promises would, in fact, be kept.

It did not look good. Five states were deadlocked, three voted for McNamara, 19 for Lachey, and 22 for Downey. Four additional states, in the third vote tomorrow, would give Downey the Presidency.

Mercurieff, Ledoux and Muldoon, gathered in the Speaker's office, each had a printout of the vote, and were going over the nine states that had either gone for McNamara or been

hung. Their only hope was to hold them, and try and prevent Downey from peeling support away from Lachey.

"Well, at least Alaska's solid," said Mercurieff.

"Really?" asked Muldoon. "I thought you didn't completely trust what's-his-name, Navarre."

"I didn't. Now I do. I called the governor today, and confirmed it. If there's a vacancy in the Senate, Navarre will be appointed. And if I'm not elected Vice President, I promised Navarre I'll resign my Senate seat. So whatever happens, next week, it will be Senator Navarre of Alaska. Provided, of course, for the next few days he does exactly as he's told."

Ledoux's phone rang. After a terse conversation, he hung up, and said, "Virginia's been in caucus. We've got a man in there. He says they've switched, going to Downey. He only needs three more."

Virginia had been counted on as one of Lachey's more solid states. It had voted for him in November, and six of its eleven member delegation were Democrats. Downey had gotten to one of them.

"Once word of this gets out, it's over," said Muldoon. "The eighteen that Lachey's still got will fall all over themselves, getting to Downey while the getting's good. Everything Lachey has promised them isn't worth a damn. Shit!"

"Lachey's people have got to hold," said Mercurieff. "We've got one hope. The word goes out tonight, right away, that four states we control have switched to Lachey. Alaska, Montana, North Dakota and Louisiana. That'll give him 22, only one less than Downey. It keeps his hopes alive."

"It's the only way," said Muldoon. "Good God. Brian Muldoon casts the vote of Montana – for Fredinand Lachey? Christ! They'll lynch me!"

"I'm calling Navarre. Brian, you need to call Cotten in North Dakota. Tommy, you'll need to get hold of Mathews, tell him to put out the word, right now, that you and he are giving Louisiana to Lachey."

"Right," said Ledoux. "Once we finish those calls we've got to get through to the five states we've got hung, and fill them in. They've got to hold, too."

Thursday, January 18th

At noon Tommy Ledoux strode up the stairs to the top of the podium. He smacked the gavel three times, and announced, "The House will come to order."

Normally, bringing order to the House, and proceeding to actual business, was a drawn out affair. Members ambled in, or out, ignoring the ritual call to order. Today would be different. Come hell or high water, Ledoux was going to start the roll call by 12:15.

Earlier in the morning, Downey had picked up his 24th state, taking it from Lachey, and leaving him with 21. Five states remained deadlocked. Just before coming on the floor, Ledoux had been told that Georgia was also turning. If Downey got it, he would be only one vote short. And Lord only knew what other irons he had in the fire. Every minute that passed was a minute given to Downey to get that last vote.

Ledoux slammed the gavel hard, and repeated, "The House will come to order!" his voice rising. "It is the intention, the chair is determined that the roll will be called at quarter past the hour. Members absent from the floor will not be counted."

Over 200 members were now on the floor, milling about the deeply blue carpeted aisles. The air was electric with intrigue. Conferring quietly in small groups, yelling across the chamber, whispering in one another's ears, they refused to be seated. According to their look and demeanor, Ledoux saw a three way pattern in the members. Some seemed grimly smug, as though they'd made their deal, and were satisfied with the rewards they would reap. Others were frantic, as they feared they were on a losing side and would be cut out from the spoils. A small minority were dismayed and disgusted as they watched the final stage of the auction.

Ten minutes after the hour, with over 300 members now on the floor, Ledoux ignored reality and declared the House in order. Five minutes would be given for the opening formalities. Just before leading the Pledge of Allegiance, Ledoux again announced that voting would begin immediately.

By 12:18 at least 400 members had assembled, with almost all of them seated, according to their state. Ledoux rapped his gavel lightly, and said, "Today the House will vote, by state, for the third time, for election to the office of President of the United States. The roll of the states will be called alphabetically. Alabama, how do you vote?"

The senior member of each state's delegation would answer the call, which in Alabama's case meant an unreconstructed 82 year old from the northern, 5th district. "Mistah Speakah, the great state of Alabamaaa proudly casts its vote foh the nex' Pres'dent of the Yoo-nited States, the Hon'able Brod'rick Downey!"

"Alaska, how do you vote?"

Representative Navarre rose and declared, "Having consulted with the political leadership of my state. And guided by that consultation, I cast Alaska's vote for President Lachey." A hum of conversation swept the hall. Everyone had heard that Navarre was voting for Lachey, but to see Alaska's vote go to a man roundly despised by 75% of its population was a bit mind boggling.

After Arizona went for Downey, Ledoux asked, "Arkansas, how do you vote?"

Arkansas had gone for Lachey in the election, but its four man delegation was evenly divided, two Republicans, two Democrats. In the second vote, a Republican, Robison, had gone with Lachey, giving him the state. Now Robison slowly rose to his feet, glanced around the room, and said, "Mr. Speaker, with an eye for resolving the constitutional crisis our great country faces, with a clear conscience, and with the best interests of our state and nation at heart, a Democratic colleague and I have changed our vote, and I can now announce that the proud state of Arkansas casts its vote for Broderick Downey, the Gov--"

Robison's voice was drowned by roars of indignation and howls of delight. If, as was believed, Georgia was also switching to Downey, Arkansas was his 26th vote. Everyone in the chamber was on their feet, cursing, high-fiving, chuckling. Only the presence of the television cameras prevented several fists from being thrown. It was five chaotic minutes before Ledoux, sick to his stomach, managed to restore enough order to call, "California, how do you vote?"

California, with its 53 members and one vote, went by the book, as did the four remaining states before Georgia. Now the hall was completely silent as Ledoux, his old heart racing, asked, "Georgia, how do you vote?"

Georgia's fourteen man delegation was split, seven Democrats, seven Republicans. If the rumors were true, one of the Democrats had sold out, for a price his colleagues could only dream about. Judging by his manner, it was not the senior member, James Johnson, a white haired African-American from Atlanta. Johnson rose, took off his glasses, and silently shook his head. To his right sat freshman Democrat John Starkey of the 2nd district. Johnson slowly walked over to Starkey and stared down at him. No one who saw it would forget the look of proud treachery on Starkey's face. In response to a whispered question from Johnson, Starkey nodded vigorously. The old man walked back to the microphone and said solemnly, "The once proud state of Georgia casts its vote for Governor Downey."

Since this had been expected, the reaction was muted, compared to the Arkansas vote. But across the floor, a low rumble of curses could be heard, mixed with soft, satisfied laughter.

Hawaii was next, and it stuck with Lachey. At Texas, the 43rd state to be called, Downey's count was 20.

In the far northwest corner of the hall sat Joanna Krueger. Directly in front of her two Democrats from western Pennsylvania began quietly swearing at each other. Pennsylvania had gone to Lachey, its delegation splitting ten to eight. The two of them had been loyal to Lachey throughout, despite having been offered some immense pork barrel projects by Downey. Each of them had also been made offers of a more personal nature.

"You dumb bastard, I told you we should have gone with Downey."

"Harlan, get fucked," answered Representative Homer Halford. "We had no choice."

"My ass," replied John Huckaby. "That inbred little cracker from Georgia is takin' home the whole hog, and we ain't got shit. Maybe it's not too late. What if we switch to Downey right now?"

"We'd be the 27th vote," answered Halford. "Are you sure he'd keep his commitments, if we weren't the ones putting him over the top?"

Texas and Utah went to Downey, Vermont to Lachey, then Virginia and Washington brought Downey to 24. After West Virginia gave him 25, Ledoux squinted into the back row, looking for Joanna Krueger. He spotted her, and their eyes met. He waited five seconds, then asked, "Wyoming, how do you vote?"

As the television cameras, spectators, press, and all of her colleagues focused on her, she took the microphone. Ever since Arkansas had gone for Downey, making Wyoming, and her, his 26th vote, she had been thinking furiously. She had come to a decision. It was a tough call, close. She thought about a short speech of explanation, but decided against it.

"Mr. Speaker, the state of Wyoming casts her vote today, as she did in November, for Senator Coke McNamara." The floor and the galleries immediately erupted in a wild bewildered roar – combining cheers, shrieks, boos, curses and groans. Downey's own running mate had snatched victory from his grasp, and she was now ringed by fellow Republicans screaming at her.

The bitterness and passion exceeded anything anyone present had seen. Vicious confrontations broke out between ecstatic supporters of Lachey versus the enraged Downey partisans. Again, if it were not for the television cameras, there would have been physical violence. The three Democrats, from Arkansas, Georgia, and Virginia, who had sold their votes to Downey, looked as though they had been diagnosed with cancer.

Moments after Krueger cast her vote, Ledoux recovered from his shock and knew what he must do. This was where the power of the chair was crucial. This was the ultimate rationale for the coup. Under the rules of the House, he was required to give the members a chance to change their vote. He believed Downey had a vote "in the weeds"; that is, they would

only be called upon to vote for him if they were to be the deciding vote. Even if no one was in the weeds, if the Downey forces were given time, they would surely turn the vote of one state.

While the clamor continued unabated, Ledoux stated quietly, "The clerk will tally the roll."

His voice drowned out by the noise, the clerk said, "The tally is 25 states for Governor Downey, nineteen states for President Lachey, one state for Senator McNamara, five states without a majority for any candidate."

In a relaxed, conversational tone, Ledoux asked, "Does any member wish to change his or her vote?" Few members were paying attention to him.

Riddick, Downey's floor manager, directly below the podium, was an exception, and Ledoux watched him closely, as he frantically scanned the floor. After a few seconds, he turned to face Ledoux and shouted, "Mr. Speaker!"

"Does the gentleman from Michigan wish to change his vote?"

"No. I move for a fifteen minute recess, to allow the members to reconsider their votes."

"The motion is out of order," snapped Ledoux. "Does any member wish to change his or her vote?"

Halford and Huckaby of Pennsylvania had managed to fight their way down to the podium, where they huddled with Riddick, who was soon nodding vigorously. Ledoux's eyes were glued to them, and the moment they began to turn to face him he whacked the gavel down, yelling, "The House is adjourned to the call of the chair."

"Mr. Speaker!" shouted Halford.

Ledoux looked down at Halford, in silence, his face impassive. Halford's eyes were rolling, his mind racing. If he declared he wanted to change his vote, he would be revealed as a turncoat. If Ledoux, as was his right as Speaker, maintained his ruling that the House had been adjourned, his treachery would be for naught. After a few moments Ledoux rose, and left the floor.

At 7:30 Bud called Pattie, and as her image appeared on his screen he had a sudden urge to be home with her tonight. But it was not to be. "I'm afraid I won't make it home tonight,

dear. There's just too much going on right now. Things are happening quickly, and I need to be here."

"I can imagine. My God, I almost fell out of my chair when Joanna Krueger voted for McNamara. Did you know that was going to happen?"

"No, I did not. Nobody saw that coming. Without her, it would be game over. Downey pulled out all the stops, laid everything he had on the line. And she pulled the plug, God bless her."

"Have you talked to her since the vote?"

"No, and as far as I know, no one else has either. She left the Capitol right after the vote, and hasn't been seen since. Muldoon will talk to her tomorrow, before the next vote, to make sure she sticks with us."

"I always liked her, even in the Vice Presidential debate with you and Tarpley. But what made her do it? Why?"

"Hard to know. I do know she's been treated pretty shabbily by Downey and his people since the election. I'll bet they regret that right now."

"I'll bet they do! I don't mean to go on so much about her, but the way she stood there, her shoulders back, and her head held high, it made so much of an impression on me. Maybe because she's so attractive, I don't know."

"She made an impression on a lot of people this afternoon. I don't know what her plans are, but if she wants to stay in public life she has a lot of potential."

"So, one more vote, tomorrow, and the Senate on Saturday?"

"That's right. The vote tomorrow is shaping up as Lachey's last stand. The wind is all out of Downey's sails, and he's losing support left and right. My job is to keep that support from switching over to Lachey. He's making headway even as we speak. I'll be up late, and up early in the morning. We're working on Riddick right now, setting up a meeting. We think he sees the handwriting on the wall, that it's hopeless for Downey. If we can get him on task we'll have a shot."

She looked at him in silence for a few moments. "You might be President by Saturday afternoon."

"It could happen."

"You're such a strange man. You know, Bud, we've been married for twenty-two years, and sometimes I think I don't know you at all."

"You know me better than anyone in the world."

She could tell he was getting fidgety, wanting to get back to work. "Good luck, Bud. I love you."

"I love you, too."

Alone in his office at midnight, with a glass of Jameson's and a cigar, Mercurieff pondered tomorrow's vote. He had just finished a long conversation with Riddick. Downey's forces were in disarray, and his entire effort was coming apart at the seams. Riddick was no friend, but he was not one to ignore reality. He would be coming aboard, and the commitments Bud would be required to make in order to keep the Republicans together, in opposition to Lachey, would make him, as President, not much better than Downey would have been. His mind wandered back to the day this whole effort began.

It was almost a year ago, soon after Downey had upset McNamara in the South Carolina Republican primary. Downey, his allies and surrogates had successfully portrayed McNamara, and his entire family, as some sort of moral degenerates. It was the most vicious and deceitful campaign in the history of modern American politics.

McNamara had asked to meet Bud, one of his most outspoken supporters, shortly thereafter. "I'm going as an independent, Bud, Tea Party. I've talked it over with my family, and they're all for it. My political, and legal, team say it's doable. I'll self-finance. If I put in half of my net worth, we'll have enough money. I can live comfortably on the half that's left. Would you back me?"

This was not a surprise to Bud. There had been a great deal of speculation that McNamara might choose this course. "You're damn right I will. To the hilt."

"The lawyers say I have start filing papers in a week, in order to qualify for the ballot in all 50 states. I'm going to need a Vice Presidential candidate. I'm asking you."

This again was not entirely unexpected. Though Bud was not a well-known national political figure, and his addition to the ticket would not add balance, he was a United States Senator, and his title would help give it legitimacy. "I'd be honored, Coke. You're making an enormous sacrifice, and a hell of a gamble, and I know why you're doing it. I'll have to talk to Pattie first, of course, but that shouldn't be a problem. If we don't win, I'm getting out of politics, won't run for reelection in two years. She'll be on board."

"One thing I need to tell you before you accept. You and I have always been close on the issues, including foreign policy. But I have a plan for the Middle East that might be too unorthodox for you, and if it is you should reconsider being my V. P. Ever since the Iranians and the Sunni radicals brought down the Saudi monarchy, the region has gone completely to hell. Jordan's about to go next. Israel is in very grave danger."

Bud nodded. "I agree. Lachey didn't lift a finger to help the Saudis, and he won't help the Jordanians. The fool won't do anything without U. N. approval. I understand. It's a very grave situation."

"My first act as President will be to seek a Congressional resolution authorizing me to impose a naval blockade of Iran. The strait of Hormuz will be closed to all traffic in and out, subject to such exceptions as we decide. The economy, the society, of Iran will collapse in a matter of months. The ayatollahs will be overthrown. We don't really know who will replace them, but it doesn't matter. Whoever runs that country is going to be reasonable, and accommodating, or the blockade continues."

"Isn't a blockade an act of war?"

"Says who? There are no rules of war. Wars either happen or they don't. No one is going to challenge the United States Navy. And no one is going to attempt to set foot on American soil. If it is war, we have nothing to fear."

"A hell of a disruption to the economy, all over the world."

"True enough, but worth the price, in my view. North America is now self-sufficient in oil, so we'll manage. It goes without saying that this idea is completely confidential."

"Of course."

"All my investments relating to oil are going to be liquidated. The price of oil will double once this happens, and I don't want to profit from it. You might consider doing the same."

"I will. God damn, Coke, it could work. Think of what this would mean for the Israelis."

"I think about that a lot. As you know, I am a Christian."

"So am I."

"As a Christian, I will not stand by and see Israel destroyed. I will do what I have to do; anything short of committing American troops on the ground. I will not sacrifice the life of one American soldier on behalf of another country, even Israel."

"I'm with you on that, and on the whole thing. Count me in."

Friday, January 19th

Mercurieff awoke at 5:00, on a cot in his office. He had slept for only four hours, and was physically tired, but soon wide awake. It would be pointless to try and get more rest, so he got up, put on a bathrobe, and made himself coffee. He would shower and shave in the Senate gym, and with fresh underclothes and shirt, would be ready for business before 6:00.

Today was the critical day, and he could finally be fully candid about the plan that he, Ledoux, and Muldoon had been executing since the coup put Tommy in the chair. He would be working on two fronts, holding off the Lachey forces in the House today, and assuring himself of the 51 votes he would need in the Senate Saturday morning. If he succeeded in both he would be sworn in as President at noon tomorrow. The latter task was the responsibility of the Senate Republican leadership, and Majority Leader Yardley, working closely with Bud's closest personal friend in the Senate, Bob Clarke of Pennsylvania, had spent several hours with him late last night. No vote would be taken for granted. Every Senator would be contacted individually, and pressed for a commitment. They didn't expect to get Inadomi of Hawaii's vote, so they couldn't afford to lose one more. Binkley and Jared were the weakest links, and there was a distinct possibility Jared would demand the Vice Presidency as the price of his vote. Mercurieff had resisted, but in the end authorized Yardley to make the deal if it was the only way.

Of the three Democrat turncoats from yesterday's vote, Limburg of Virginia had been the first to recant, followed soon after by Beechum of Arkansas. Starkey of Georgia would back away this morning as well. All three had been given assurances that Downey had 26 states, and that the controversy caused by their votes would be quickly overwhelmed by the cascade of events which would follow from finally resolving the political crisis the nation had been embroiled in since the Presidential election had been thrown into the House.

Without their votes, Downey was back to 22, and all his momentum was lost, and reversed. Lachey, working from his base of nineteen states, needed six more to win reelection. Arkansas would be the first to go. Several of Downey's other states were beginning to look soft as well, and once they began to abandon him for Lachey, the momentum for would build.

When informed, just before 7:00, that Ledoux was up and at work he went to the Speaker's chambers in the Capitol to confer with Tommy and Muldoon. They had arranged a meeting with Riddick at 8:00.

Tommy looked unwell, and both Mercurieff and Muldoon were concerned. "You feeling O. K., Tommy?" asked Bud.

"I'll be alright," he replied. "But, to tell you the truth, I'm not sure I'm young enough for this job. I'm wearin' down, and my blood pressure is through the roof. I've already talked about this with Brian. If Riddick agrees to play ball, I'm going to step down as Speaker, let him take over. I'll take Rules, and Brian will get Ways and Means. It might encourage him to work with us today."

This was not a complete surprise to Mercurieff, but he had one objection. "I'm going to ask you to stay on as Speaker for another ten days or so. Once I get sworn in, if I get sworn in, I've got a plan to deal with the situation in the Middle East. I'm going to need a Joint Resolution passed in order to do it, and I'd feel more comfortable with you in the chair."

"I can make it for that long."

"Thanks. I've got Downey at 21, Lachey at 20. What's your count?"

"It's Lachey 21, Downey 20," said Muldoon. "We figure he's got two more about to switch. He's getting close."

Riddick arrived in a foul mood. As the Republican leader in the House, it had been his responsibility to assemble the 26 states for Downey, and he had failed, thwarted by none other than the three men he was conferring with. His mood brightened considerably when told he would soon become Speaker. If their efforts today were successful, the man he was working with, Bud Mercurieff would be President, and Riddick would have done him a great favor. When a President was indebted to the Speaker of the House, good things happened, from the Speaker's perspective.

"Here's the situation, as I read it, gentlemen," he said. "It's over for Downey. He won't admit it, but it's a fact. McNamara was never in the game, once he lost Texas. So it boils down to either Lachey or you, Bud, assuming you've got 51 in the Senate."

"I'm working on that, Yardley and others are working on that. We feel confident. We'll lose Inadomi, but everybody else should hold."

"They'd better. We all thought Lachey was bad. Can you imagine Tarpley? Christ! Anyway, I've got 25 or 30 members you need to talk to personally. They're people I can't completely rely on, people Lachey might be able to get to. They've stayed in line up to now because of personal commitments made to them by Downey. Most of these people wouldn't really pull the trigger, jump ship. But some of them would. And I don't know for sure which of them might really go. To hold them, they'll need to get commitments from you."

Knowing the answer, Bud nonetheless asked, "What kind of commitments?"

"Pretty much everything you'd expect. Federal judgeships, price supports, sugar tariffs. They represent oil and gas, insurance, big pharma, Wall Street, hedge funds, the big banks, Las Vegas. They have a variety of interests."

"Anything illegal?"

"Not as far as I know."

It was what he expected, but that didn't make it go down any better. He looked to Muldoon, then Ledoux. Both were impassive. It was his decision. He asked them anyway. "Brian, what do you think?"

"Looks to me like it won't be a Mercurieff administration, it'll be a Downey administration."

"Tommy?"

"We figured it might come down to this. Anybody in their right mind would take Downey over Lachey, if that was the only choice. You've got to decide if you're willing to play that role. It's another 'corrupt bargain', to use an old phrase. It's not going to make you look good, Bud."

Turning to Riddick, Bud asked, "You didn't mention anything about foreign policy, as being on anybody's list, is that right?"

"Right."

"I'd have that. I've thought this through, at length. Like you said, Tommy, we always knew this might be the price. I'm willing to pay it. Jack, you said I need to talk to 25 or 30. Have you got a list?"

Riddick pulled several printed sheets of paper from his suit pocket. "Got it right here."

"It's going to take me all day to get through to all of them. We'll have to delay the session until five or so."

"I'm going to leave the appointed time for going into session at noon," said Tommy. "No need to let Lachey know what the timetable is. I'll put it off an hour at a time. You let me know whenever you're ready, Bud, and I'll gavel us in."

"Jack, I'm going to want you with me today, all day, for these meetings with your members. When can we get started?"

"Meet me in my office at nine and we'll be ready to go. I'll get my whips started setting everything up."

"I'll see you there. Tommy, Brian, I've got to get back to my office for a few things. We'll be in touch."

There was a sign of regret, or sadness, on Tommy's face, as though he didn't think quite as much of Bud Mercurieff as he did before. But he smiled, and said, "Get busy, Bud." He shook his head. "Sometimes a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do."

At the stroke of seven Tommy Ledoux gaveled the House to order. Just as yesterday, he would brook no delay in the conduct of the fourth and final attempt by the House of Representatives to elect a President. "The House will come to order," shouted Ledoux, stroking the gavel three times. From his perch atop the podium, he had a clear view of the action on the floor. On his left, Democratic Minority Leader Moore was at the center of a whirlwind of action, as and his whips desperately tried to line up 26 states.

Many believed that Lachey's great advantage today was that if the House deadlocked again, and the Senate made the choice, Senators, and not Representatives, would reap the rewards, since only Lachey had a chance of winning. This was the theory discussed by the experts analyzing today's vote on the television networks, at least. What the experts did not know was that Mercurieff had spent the entire day promising the same rewards that Downey had offered.

On Ledoux's right, Majority Leader Riddick and Senator Mercurieff were surrounded by a score of Republicans. As a Senator, Bud had the privileges of the floor, and at the moment he and Riddick were in deep conversation with Representative Weiskopf of South Dakota.

"He gets the dam, and price support for wheat. That was the deal," Riddick said to Mercurieff.

"Fine," said Bud. "That's my deal, too."

"There's another thing," said Weiskopf. "I want support for a \$30 million rider for a research center on genetically modified crops at the University of South Dakota."

Merculieff looked to Riddick, who said, "I didn't know about that. I'd heard there might be something else in Weiskopf's package. But this is new to me."

"Lachey's people have promised me this, and a lot more, as a matter of fact."

"If I give you that, you vote for Downey?" asked Bud.

"Yes."

"It's a deal." Even as Bud uttered these words, a shade of doubt crossed his mind. There was something about Weiskopf that wasn't quite right. He stank with perspiration – flop sweat.

Elsewhere on the floor, Brian Muldoon hurried about. His job was to ensure that the four states which were controlled by McNamara loyalists, and which yesterday had gone to Lachey, would today vote for Downey. He was also attempting to keep the states that had evenly split delegations from going to Lachey. Finally, the only vote McNamara had actually received, Wyoming's, must stay put.

"Joanna," Muldoon said. "How are you?"

"All right, I guess. I see Merculieff's now talking to a couple members from Iowa. Ethanol, anyone?"

"He's doing what he has to do. Things are trending Lachey's way. There's no choice."

"Ledoux's amplified voice boomed across the chamber. "The House will come to order. The members will take their seats, and we will come to order. The vote will begin at fifteen minutes after the hour, on the mark.

"You're going to stick with McNamara, correct?"

"Yes. Don't worry about me."

Minutes later, as Ledoux once again declared the House in order, and led the Pledge of Allegiance, Muldoon, Riddick and Merculieff talked quietly directly below the podium.

"What's his count," asked Muldoon.

"We've got him at 24, maybe 25," said Riddick. "It's going to be close."

"Alabama, how do you vote?" Ledoux said loudly.

"Alabama votes for Downey."

"Alaska, how do you vote?"

"Alaska votes for Downey."

There was one surprise vote for Lachey in the 38 states which followed, which would still leave him one vote short. Every member of the House, and every informed observer in the country, and the world, knew how each state was expected to vote, and what the final tally would be if everything went according to form. There were ten states left, and the count was Lachey 21, Downey 19. Lachey was expected to win four more states, leaving him one vote short.

"South Dakota, how do you vote?"

"South Dakota votes for President Lachey," said Weiskopf, his voice breaking. He sat down, folded his arms across his chest, and stared vacantly at the south wall. He was immediately surrounded by Republicans from South Carolina and Tennessee, who grabbed him by his shoulders, shook him, shouting and swearing. He leaned forward on his bench seat, hunched his shoulders, and lowered his head, refusing to respond.

The House was in an uproar, as every member understood what Weiskopf had done. Alone at the podium, Ledoux tapped his gavel, and said, "The House will come to order," without real conviction. "God damn it," he muttered to himself. His eyes scanned the floor until he found Muldoon, who was staring directly at him. He slowly set down his gavel, eyes still fixed on Muldoon, and reached across his left chest with his right hand, as if to scratch his left shoulder. Midway through this motion he tapped his chest twice, nodding almost imperceptibly to Muldoon.

Nodding back, Muldoon walked down the aisle toward him, raising his right arm, and shouted, "Mr. Speaker!"

Ledoux tapped his gavel, and said, "The gentleman from Montana is out of order."

"Mr. Speaker!" he shrieked, put both hands to his heart, and toppled to the floor, lying motionless.

"Sergeant at arms! Get the medic to the floor, to tend to Representative Muldoon. The House will stand at ease." Ledoux hurried off the podium and pushed his way through to Muldoon. He leaned down and whispered, "About fifteen minutes."

"Right," grunted Muldoon.

Regaining his feet, Ledoux looked to the southeast entrance, and saw Mercurieff enter the floor, heading for Weiskopf. There were a couple dozen Republicans surrounding him now, and he had some difficulty shouldering them aside. When he broke through he sat down next to Weiskopf, put his arm around his shoulder, and said, "Sit up, damn it. It's me, Mercurieff. Look at me."

Weiskopf gradually straightened up, looked at Bud, and said, "I'm sorry. There's nothing I can do."

"What do you mean, there's nothing you can do?" said Bud, his face reddening, eyes glaring. "You can change your vote. You have to change your vote, Weiskopf."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I gave my word."

"You gave your word!" growled Bud, his eyes now glowing, and locked into Weiskopf's. In a second their color changed from a brownish hazel into bright pale green. This transformation shocked Weiskopf, his head snapping back, his eyes held by Mercurieff's. Rather, the left eye held. His right eye was moving independently of the left, and it wandered to the far right of his eye socket.

"What did they offer you? What's the deal?"

"Nothing, I'm getting nothing," said Weiskopf, his voice trembling.

He tried to look away, but Mercurieff grabbed his head with his left hand and turned it back to him. Bud's beet red face was a menace, ferocious, his brows knit, nostrils flared, bright green eyes burning into Weiskopf. "Are they blackmailing you? Is it blackmail?"

"Weiskopf nodded, "Yes."

"Listen to me. You change your vote, Lachey loses, and this goes to the Senate. It'll be between me and Tarpley, and it's going to be me. I'm going to be the President, as of tomorrow. And I will get the FBI and every other law enforcement in the country to get on this case. Anyone connected with this attempt on your vote will go to jail, if they expose whatever it is you're hiding. This can all be done confidentially. If somebody exposes you they go to jail, big time, ten, twenty years. I will be in a position to protect you, and I will."

Weiskopf licked his lips, sighed, and said, "What if it's not you? What if it's Tarpley? What then?"

"Get up. Get on your feet. We're going to talk to Tarpley, right now. Get up."

Bud lifted Weiskopf to his feet and pushed his way through the crowd around them toward the exit. He forced his way out of the hall, Weiskopf in tow, until they reached a small conference room outside the chamber. Once there he closed the door, turned on the videophone, hit the record button, and punched in Tarpley's number. In a moment the Vice President looked at them from the screen.

"Weiskopf's being blackmailed," he said. "I've told him if he changes his vote, one of us will be elected President in the Senate tomorrow. I told him if it's me, I protect him, get the FBI, everybody on the case. Anybody exposes him, they go to jail, to the max. All confidential. The word goes out that anybody who fucks with Weiskopf has a world of hurt coming to them. He wants to hear the same from you."

Tarpley was calm, and cool. "You have my word, Representative. All the assurances given by Senator Mercurieff I will personally guarantee you."

Mercurieff was surprised by Tarpley's demeanor. He knows something else, he's got something he's hiding, Bud thought.

"Listen to me, Weiskopf," said Tarpley. "You're ruining yourself for nothing. You're the twenty-second vote, and you're assuming Lachey has four more. He doesn't. If you decide not to change your vote, and stay with Lachey, I am in a position to see that he only gets three more, not four. So, you see, it's up to you. If you refuse to change your vote, Lachey will still come up a vote short, and will be unable to help you. If you do agree to change your vote, either Mercurieff or I will be President, and you'll be protected."

Weiskopf was confused, the numbers spinning in his head. The bulb in his brain was of low wattage to begin with, and he dimwittedly tried to make sense of what was going on. He looked from the screen to Mercurieff, who said, "I was not aware that Vice President Tarpley had the ability to take one of Lachey's four remaining votes away from him. But I believe what he's telling us. Your only chance, the only way you can get out of this, is by agreeing, right now, to vote for Downey."

"I'm still screwed, no matter what," said Weiskopf. All the color had drained from his twitching face. He looked back and forth between Mercurieff and the screen. "How do I explain switching back? What can I say?"

"I'll say it for you," said Bud. "There was a failure of communication, between me and you. You were under the impression that if the election were thrown into the Senate, you'd lose

your dam. When I cleared that up, promised you the dam, you were free to vote your conscience. Being a staunch Republican, you went back to Downey."

"How can I be sure? How can I trust you?"

Merculieff's eyes brightened and hardened as he leaned into Weiskopf. "Listen, you fat bastard. There are people around here who keep their word. I'm one of them."

"O. K., O. K. I agree."

As Merculieff and Weiskopf reentered the House chamber all eyes turned to them, and the hubbub of conversation ceased. In the crowd by the entrance Bud spotted Joanna Krueger and Collins of Nevada. He beckoned to them to him, and said, "Weiskopf's changing his vote. He's going to stay right here, until the Speaker calls for a change in the vote. I'd like the two of you to stand with him, don't let anybody get to him, bother him. O. K.?"

Striding over to Ledoux, at the base of the podium, Bud leaned to his ear, saying, "We got him back. Let's get this over with."

"Good. All right."

As Muldoon was carried off the floor on a stretcher Ledoux resumed the chair, whacked his gavel, and said, "The House will come back to order. The members will please resume their seats. We will complete the roll at this time. Tennessee, how do you vote?"

No one had watched the Weiskopf drama with more intensity than Democratic Representative Byron Brown of Wisconsin. He was a slight, pale, freckled, curly headed man, 38 years old. For the last six days, since a recording from Puerto Rico was delivered to him, his life had been a living hell. This morning his contact told him to follow the instructions of a man in the gallery dressed in a red sport coat, blue shirt, and white tie. Thumbs up for Lachey, down for Downey. Forty yards away, in the front row, a bald and bearded man, garishly clad Greg Palamountain, stared down at him. When Ledoux called out, "Wisconsin, how do you vote?" Brown looked up, and he felt his eyes boring in on him. Palamountain rubbed his mouth with the front of his hand, thumb extended, up. Brown almost collapsed in relief, and sat quietly as his delegation's senior member replied, "Wisconsin votes for Lachey."

"Wyoming, how do you vote?"

Shouting to be heard above the rising roar in the chamber, Joanna Krueger yelled, "McNamara. Wyoming for McNamara."

"The clerk will tally the roll."

"Twenty-six states for President Lachey, eighteen for Governor Downey, one for Senator McNamara, five states with no majority."

"Does any member wish to change his or her vote?"

Weiskopf shouted, "Mr. Speaker!"

"The chair recognizes the gentleman from South Dakota."

"South Dakota changes its vote, and now votes for Governor Downey."

"Very well," said Ledoux. The tally is now twenty-five states for President Lachey, nineteen for Downey, one for McNamara, five not voting. Does any other member wish to change his or her vote?"

As no one stepped forward in response, the members and gallery began to yell at one another, cheering or cursing. "We need a recess!" screamed Minority Leader Moore. "We demand another vote!"

"The gentleman from Illinois is out of order." One, two, three, Tommy counted silently to himself. "The House is adjourned to the call of the chair." He tapped his gavel, rose to his feet, and walked slowly down the podium's stairs.

At the conclusion of his meeting with Majority Leader Yardley and others in the Senate leadership, Bud was not entirely confident he would have the votes on the Senate floor tomorrow. Inadomi was gone. His election four years ago was a fluke, and his vote for Tarpley would go a long way to assuring his reelection in strongly Democratic Hawaii. That left 51 Republicans, the bare minimum. In order to secure the support of Jared, a liberal Republican from Vermont, he'd been forced to agree to appoint him as his Vice President. That left Binkley as the weak link, along with a few others like him who had major differences with Mercurieff on various matters of policy.

He had one card left to play. As he waited for the call to Downey to go through, he tried to come up with the right approach.

When Downey's image appeared on his screen, he said, "Thanks for taking my call, Governor. You know, none of this was personal, for me."

"That makes me feel a whole lot better." Downey paused, looking intently at Bud with barely disguised hostility. "You've had quite a run, Bud."

"There's still a ways to go. The Senate's got to vote tomorrow."

"You've got 52 Republicans. What's the problem?" Downey showed a distinct lack of interest in Bud's situation.

"Inadomi's gone – he was always a Democrat in disguise. The other 51 have to stick together. I can't lose one."

"Tall order."

"Tarpley would be a disaster as President. Worse than Lachey."

"That could be. What's the point of this call, Bud?"

"You've got influence in the Senate, with people who might be thinking of bolting, going with Tarpley. People who don't think of me as a Republican any more, but as Tea Party. People who think I screwed you, the Republican candidate, out of the Presidency."

"Those people have a point."

"Let me tell you something, Brod. You came within one Senate seat of becoming President. Leave Inadomi out of this – he doesn't count as a Republican. If we didn't have 51 Republican votes in the Senate, I wouldn't be doing this, I would have thrown the election to you in the House. As God is my witness, I would have, once it became clear McNamara couldn't win. If the Democrats had a majority, or even if it was tied, in the Senate, I never would have taken a chance on Tarpley getting in. You're vastly preferable to Tarpley or Lachey. We would have made you President in a heartbeat, if that was the only alternative. Again, nothing personal."

"Hmph. I see that now. Christ! To think of all the effort I put in to get a Senate majority." Downey paused, and looked away. "I guess I really didn't think it all the way through, until now when it's too late."

"Not many people did."

"You sure as hell did. But, here we are. You're asking for my help."

"I am."

Downey thought for a while. "Have you got Jared?"

"He's my Vice President."

Downey laughed and shook his head. "Jesus Christ. What about Binkley?"

"He gave me his vote two weeks ago. But with him, you never know."

"Joe Binkley," he chuckled. "I could tell you some things about Joe Binkley. All this is very well and good, Bud. But what it boils down to is this: what's in it for me?"

"I'll be President of the United States. I'll be able to do lots of things."

Downey leaned back in his chair and looked up at the ceiling. "I think I want to be Secretary of State. This would be a personal agreement, just between the two of us. You would conduct a normal search, then make an announcement with me at your side, saying that I was the best choice, and you're pleased that I accepted. No bullshit, no weaseling or backsliding."

"Give me a minute to think. I wasn't expecting this." Bud looked down at his desk, lost in thought for a minute.

"All right. We've got a deal."

"I'm not willing to go public with my support for you. Stubborn Irish pride, I guess. But I'll make the calls. I can get to Binkley, and the others you're worried about."

"All right."

"One more thing. If I change my mind, decide I want something different, I'll let you know, and we'll talk about it. If we mutually agree on an alternative, I might give State up."

"That's fine with me."

"It's funny how things all work out. Let me ask you a question. When did you get Joanna Kreuger to switch, and come over to your side?"

"We didn't get her to switch. She did it on her own. She figured out, herself, what we were up to, and decided to support us, once she realized we could really pull it off."

"Son of a bitch."

Saturday, January 20th

Bud sat alone in his Senate office, racking his brain in attempting to think of what more he could do. The vote was set for 10:00, in ten minutes. He had done all he could. He turned on his computer and browsed some news sites, until he came to the Drudge Report. The lead picture showed him and Weiskopf on the House floor. Bud was holding him by his lapels, and Weiskopf had a look of panic on his face. Bud's face was contorted in a ferocious snarl, his eyes glowing, pale green, diabolical. The caption beneath read, "Hunting for votes, Mercurieff style."

"Oh, shit," he muttered. The damage done to him by that picture was incalculable. He wasn't sure how he could recover, politically. He could only imagine what Pattie would think when she saw it. It was so bad it could even be used as an excuse to vote against him, if a Senator was so inclined. He turned off the computer and left for the floor.

Vice President Tarpley was in the chair when he arrived, a look of smug confidence on his face. Bud joined Majority Leader Yardley and a few other Senators who were awaiting the appointed hour. While they waited he had a word with his friend, Bob Clarke of Pennsylvania.

"Did you see that picture of me on Drudge?"

"Yeah, yeah I did. Not good."

"That's going to take me a while to live down."

"Yes, it will. On the other hand," Clarke said, chuckling, "nobody's going to want to piss you off. Shit!"

"Thanks, Bob."

"The Senate will come to order," announced Tarpley. "We will proceed to vote. The question before the Senate, as proscribed by the Twelfth Amendment, is who shall be elected to the office of Vice President, Senator Bud Mercurieff or Vice President Lem Tarpley? The clerk will call the roll."

The Senators would vote in alphabetical order. "Senator Abercrombie," said the clerk, in a stern tone, his deep voice amplified by speakers above the chambers. Abercrombie shouted out, "Mercurieff."

"Senator Abercrombie – Mercurieff," announced the clerk. "Senator Baxter," he continued. He waited five seconds for Baxter to cast his vote. Hearing nothing, he continued through

the roll. "Senator Binkley." Binkley was not present either, so the clerk continued through the alphabet.

Only two thirds of the Senators would vote on the initial roll. After it concluded, Senators could vote at any time. When the clerk completed the roll, he paused, tallied the vote, and declared, "32 votes for Vice President Tarpley. 33 votes for Senator Mercurieff." There had been no surprises. All the Democrats voted for Tarpley, as had Inadomi. All the other Republicans voted for Mercurieff. The 65 Senators who had voted remained on the floor. Most went to their desks, seated themselves, surveyed the floor, and chatted with their neighbors. A small knot of Senators huddled in the well, in two separate groups, Republican and Democrat. The Republicans were Yardley, his Whip, Abercrombie, Mercurieff and Clarke of Pennsylvania.

Senator McNamara appeared at the back of the chamber. He walked purposefully down the aisle, nodding to the four of them as he approached the clerk. "Mercurieff," he said.

"Gentlemen," he said, as he joined them. Poker faced, he looked Mercurieff directly in the eye.

"Going to form, so far," Bud said.

McNamara nodded, continuing to look in Bud's eyes. His own were expressionless. Finally he shook his head, turned away and walked to his desk.

Milking the moment for all it was worth, throughout the next half hour Senators came to the chamber individually. As each Senator arrived, the television cameras would focus on him or her; all the network anchors identified them, and breathlessly predicted their vote. Observing the scene on television monitors throughout the Capitol, Senators concluded that the longer they waited, the more dramatic their entrance, and vote. The entire country, and much of the world, was watching, and the temptation to grab the spotlight was irresistible.

So it was that at eleven o'clock, with the count even at 47 apiece, six Senators had not voted, four Republicans and two Democrats. Tarpley squirmed in agitation in the chair. At 11:05 a Democrat arrived, a few minutes later a Republican, and the rumble of quiet conversation filled the room. The overflowing galleries added to the subdued buzz. Many of the Senators were becoming angry. The four holdouts were grandstanding, and were resented.

The network anchormen had the largest and most attentive audience of their careers, and they reveled in the drama, with analysis and speculation centered on the four who were yet to vote. Their photographs were interposed over the picture of the Senate floor.

Biographical sketches were given of each, and the anchors added personal anecdotes of their own experiences with them. Solemn ruminations on their motivation and likely vote

filled the dead air time. No one suggested that they might simply be delaying in order to call attention to themselves.

At long last three of the remaining four arrived, and voted. The count was now 50 for Mercurieff, 49 for Tarpley. Binkley alone remained. At 11:30 he came onto the floor, and walked toward the clerk. He stopped short ten feet from his desk, and slowly scanned the floor of the Senate, his expression one of deep concentration. He looked up to Tarpley for a moment, then over to Bud. He took the last few steps to the clerk, and said softly, "Mercurieff." The shouts and groans in the gallery grew louder as the clerk announced, "Senator Binkley – Mercurieff." A few moments later he announced, "The results of the vote are 51 for Mercurieff, 49 for Tarpley."

After a few moments a grim faced Tarpley asked, "Does any Senator wish to change his or her vote?"

A minute of deadly silence ensued. At last, Tarpley declared, "Senator Mercurieff has been elected to the Vice Presidency."

The Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was waiting in the Capitol Rotunda. At noon he would administer the oath of office to President Bud Mercurieff.

Sunday, January 21st

Awaiting a call from President Mercurieff, Senator Randall Jared smiled in anticipation. Until his appointment was confirmed by the House and Senate, he would be a model Vice President. Once sworn into office, all that would change. He intended to transform the office, acting as a sort of ombudsman, a whistleblower ready to expose and publicize any defect within the Mercurieff administration. He would be shunned and vilified within that administration as a result, but would emerge as the focus of the opposition, the most prominent and outspoken critic in the country.

When he was told Mercurieff was on the line he straightened his tie and put on an expression of friendly deference.

"Good morning, Mr. President."

"Morning, Senator. Per our agreement, I'm prepared to nominate you as my Vice President tomorrow. But before I do, I want you to know that I will make it clear why I am making the nomination. It is because, and only because, you told me that either I made you V. P. or you

would vote for Tarpley. This might complicate your ability to win confirmation. As agreed, I will support you. I'll just be honest about why."

"You son of a ..." sputtered Jared. You're not supporting me. You're killing me. I won't have a prayer, as you know damn well. You're breaking your word, you ..."

"No, no. I will support this nomination. I'll ask Representatives and Senators to vote to confirm. I will just explain why."

"You're screwing yourself here, too, Mr. President. Everyone will know this wasn't part of our agreement. This is not how deals are done in this town. You're stabbing a United States Senator in the back, and it won't be forgotten. You're going to pay a price for this."

"I can handle the price. So, what do you say? Shall I nominate you, as I've described, or would you rather cancel our little arrangement?"

"Go to hell."

"I interpret that as a 'no.' Correct?"

"Yeah, it's a no. I'm going to be a Senator for a very long time. And I will find a way to make you regret this." Jared leaned forward, punched a button, and the screen went blank.

Mercurieff swiveled his chair to McNamara. "That, I enjoyed."

"Jesus Christ, Mr. President. You just cut the man's balls off!" said McNamara. "What's going on?"

"Coke, I don't care for this 'Mr. President business, not when it's just you and me. Call me Bud."

"Very well."

Mercurieff smiled broadly. "We pulled it off, Coke. When you decided to run last year, as an independent, Tea Party candidate, and you picked me as your running mate, people thought we were nuts. We didn't have a prayer. Thanks to a whole lot of work, by millions of people all across the country, and a little good fortune, we pulled it off. Tomorrow I'm nominating you for the Vice Presidency. We'll get Ledoux and Yardley to speed up the confirmation, and when you're sworn in, in less than a week, I resign, and then I get the hell out of Dodge. If I stuck around I'd just be a distraction."

"You planned this, all along."

"I did. I hoped that we would win the election, or we somehow could win in the House, but those were long shots. I figured this was our best chance."

"You made a lot of promises, cut a lot of deals for votes. I didn't approve, don't approve, of that."

"That was all part of the plan. I made those promises, cut those deals. If I stayed in office I'd be bound by them. You're not. I had to keep this secret. If people thought I was your stalking horse, they would have insisted that you make the promises instead of me. So you start with a clean slate. Can do what's right."

"I feel like I should apologize to you, Bud. A lot of my family, friends have been saying you made a fool of me. Used me, for your own ambition. I was starting to believe them. What you've done, what you're doing, is remarkable."

"Thanks, Coke. I do have a request. Weiskopf of South Dakota was blackmailed into voting for Lachey. To get him back I promised that the full resources of the federal government would be available to protect him from further embarrassment. I'm asking you to keep that pledge."

"Not a problem. Bud, who else knows about your plan, making me V. P. and then resigning?"

"I told Pattie about an hour ago. She's the only one."

"Not even Ledoux?"

"Not even Tommy."

McNamara stared at Bud for a few seconds, then started laughing out loud. "My God, Bud. Incredible. Everybody knows Bud Mercurieff can keep his mouth shut, but this is ridiculous. Amazing."

"My Indian blood. But, seriously, word is going to get out before long. Who knows what Jared is telling people. Before the rumor mill gets started, I'm having a press conference to announce my intentions. I'm going to do it as soon as we wrap this meeting up. I'm going to explain that everything I've done is legal, and strictly according to the letter of the Constitution. When they wrote the Twelfth Amendment they knew exactly what they were doing, and that is how this all came to happen. And I'm going to stress that I've done this on my own. I deceived a lot of people in order to do this. I don't regret anything I've done, would do it all again. But it's going to be portrayed as shady, somehow beneath the dignity of the office. But you had nothing to do with it, didn't know about it until this morning."

"And then you walk away. What are you going to do?"

"A friend of mine is sailing around the world, and Pattie and I have been invited along. I'm taking him up on his offer. We'll be gone for a year, maybe two."

"And that's it. You, personally, don't get anything out of this."

Bud grunted, and smiled. "Here's what I get. Herman Innocent Mercurieff, the son of Suzie Mercurieff, from the village of Ouzinkie, in Kodiak, Alaska, became President of the United States. I'll settle for that."

Thursday, August 9th

At midnight, in the harbor of Port Louis, on the island of Mauritius, east of Madagascar, Kat, Bud, Pattie and Sundance prepared for today's show, which would air at 3:00 p. m., east coast time. Pattie was now the call screener, since Grossberg's chronic seasickness had prevented him from continuing on the voyage, and Sundance had taken over as board operator. Since Kat put so few callers on the air, her principal duties were to establish telephone contact with scheduled guests and to provide content in the form of celebrity gossip and scandal. She had long been an avid reader of People magazine, and enjoyed discussing the lives of Hollywood stars.

At 12:05 Kat opened the show. "This is the Katman, coming at you from the south side, of the equator, that is, here in the Indian Ocean. Off the island of Mauritius. First up, newsman Bud Mercurieff will be giving us all the world and national news, but first, Bud, explain to me why we need to spend an entire week here."

"This is the site of one of British Commodore Jack Aubrey's most amazing victories, Kat. In the Napoleonic Wars. We're going to be able to cruise the actual battle scenes. I've got maps, and everything. I am totally pumped to be here."

After circumnavigating Australia the MV Kathouse sailed due west for more than 4000 miles. They hadn't seen land for two weeks, other than the small island of Rodriguez a couple days ago, and everyone was glad to make port, especially at a premier tourist destination such as Mauritius. Kat didn't mind Bud's interest in historical tourism, but felt obligated to give him a hard time about it. He was anxious to get to Madagascar, and then Mombasa, Kenya, where he, with bow and arrow, would hunt lion, while the rest of the crew went on a photo safari.

"Jack Aubrey, huh?"

"My main man."

"If you say so. What's up with the news?"

"The main story continues to be Iran, and the fall of the ayatollahs. Fighting continues between elements of the Revolutionary Guard and a coalition of more moderate elements in the army. Food riots continue in Tehran and other major cities. President McNamara continues to insist on an end to their nuclear program and a renunciation of their state of war with Israel as preconditions for lifting the naval blockade."

"Nothing really new there," said Kat.

"No, but it's the big story, nonetheless. Iranian society is unraveling. This is a major geopolitical event."

"Anything else going on?"

"Not too much in Washington, with Congress going into its August recess. A signing ceremony today at the White House, on the banking bill, breaking up the big Wall Street banks. No more 'too big to fail', as far as the banks go, anyway."

"Sundance," said Kat. "What's up with sports?"

Sundance reported the latest from the world of baseball, followed by Pattie with celebrity gossip. Kat continually interrupted both of them, with snide comments and exaggerated criticisms of the athletes and movie stars. Pattie stood her ground, and her unwillingness to be bullied by Kat was becoming a regular feature of the show. Kat had been pleased by the latest ratings, which showed a marked increase in women listeners.

And viewers. The cable network which telecast the show had a small but growing audience, something Pattie was well aware of. Many of her friends watched, and she put a great deal of effort into her appearance, all with good effect. She had even managed to shed the fifteen pounds of weight she had put on since her wedding day. She had never looked better in her life. Her one regret was her wardrobe, which was entirely inadequate for daily television appearances. Mauritius was teeming with clothing stores, and she and Melanie were planning major shopping expeditions.

Melanie had accepted Kat's proposal of remarriage, and, inspired perhaps by Pattie, had lost ten pounds herself. Her son George was having the time of his life on the cruise, and was greatly relieved by the reconciliation of his parents.

The show continued for three hours, with Kat, the star, and his new supporting cast providing him set up lines. Bud and Pattie were playing their roles well, and Kat was convinced the show was better than ever. Bud was being paid the same salary that

Aranzubia had earned, likewise with Pattie and Grossberg's wages. They were both making more money than they ever had in their lives.

At noon Mercurieff was typing away at his computer on the rear deck. After the show he had slept soundly for six hours, until ten, and had been working since then.

The book was coming along nicely, but there was a problem. In telling the stark truth about the recent struggle for the Presidency he was damning almost the entire political establishment of the United States. President Lachey, Vice President Tarpley, Governor Downey, a majority of the Supreme Court, most members of Congress of both major parties, the lobbyists, labor bosses, trial lawyers and fat cats who bankrolled American politics, the pompous journalists and clueless TV newsmen – almost everyone involved in politics – looked very bad. If this book was widely read, and believed, the public outcry it might arouse could have unhealthy consequences; if not a tax revolt, perhaps an even greater withdrawal by the public from involvement in politics. On the other hand, it might encourage a new push for the most effective political reform he knew of – term limits.

He put these concerns aside and carried on. He was writing about one of his favorite parts, Tommy Ledoux's coup in the House of Representatives. He despised former Speaker Moore, a colossally arrogant man, and telling the inside story of his downfall was great fun.

Bud could now hear Pattie getting up in their cabin and preparing to take a shower. She was having difficulty again with the faucets. "Bud!" she called out. "I need help!"

"Chicken shit," he said softly, saved his work and shut down the computer.

"I'm coming."