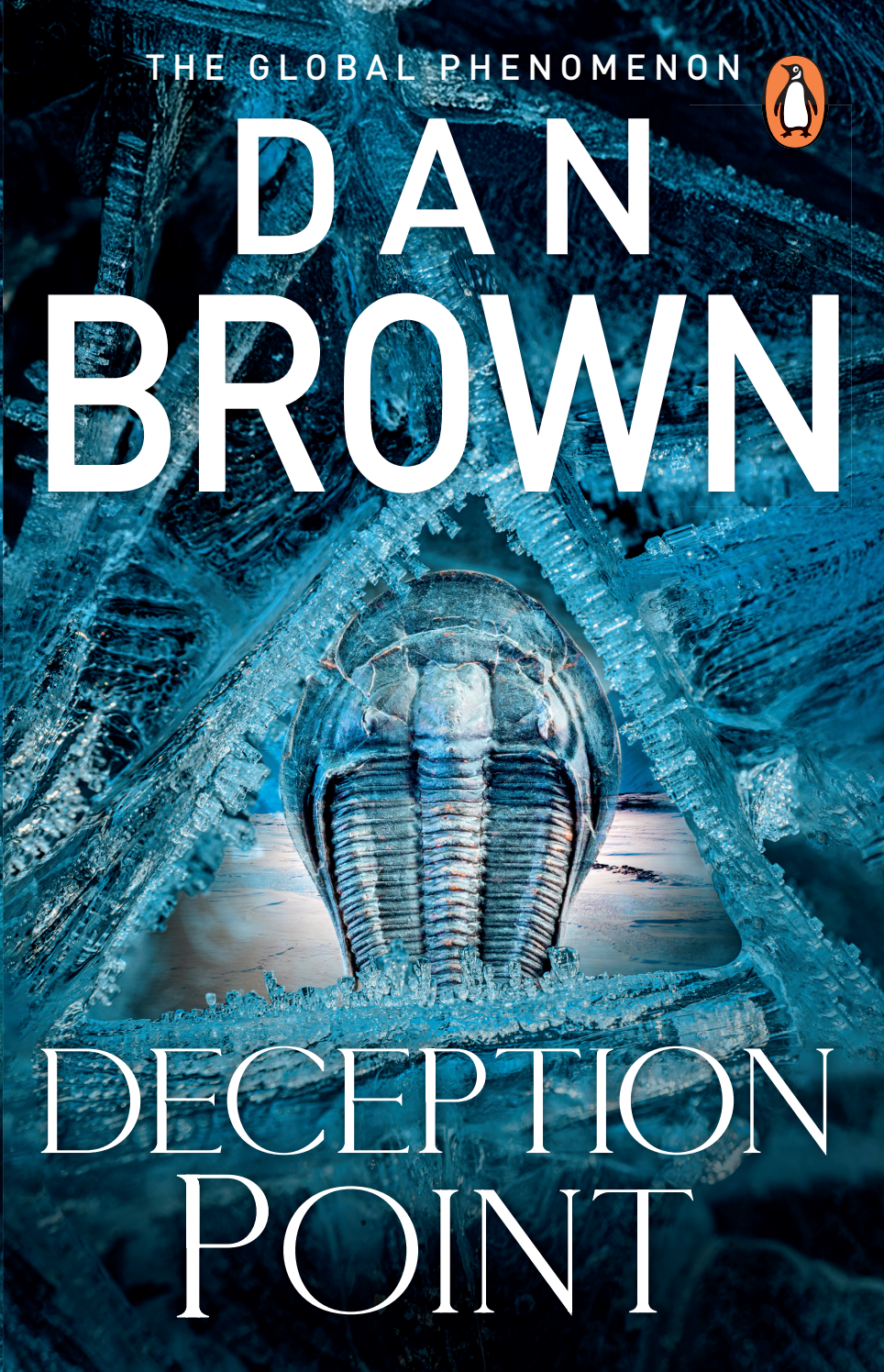
THE GLOBAL PHENOMENON

DAN BROWN



DECEPTION POINT

DAN BROWN

is the bestselling author of *Digital Fortress*, *Deception Point*, *Angels & Demons*, *The Da Vinci Code*, *The Lost Symbol*, *Inferno*, *Origin* and *The Secret of Secrets*. Three of his Robert Langdon novels have been adapted for the screen by Ron Howard, starring Tom Hanks. They have all been international blockbusters.

Dan Brown is a graduate of Amherst College and Phillips Exeter Academy, where he has taught English and Creative Writing. He lives in New England.

www.danbrown.com
www.danbrownofficial.co.uk

Copyrighted Material
www.penguin.co.uk

BY DAN BROWN

Digital Fortress

An impossibly complex code threatens to obliterate the balance of world power forever . . .

'Fascinating'
Washington Post

Deception Point

An apparently miraculous scientific discovery might change the future of the planet if its truth is revealed . . .

'Thundering'
Chicago Tribune

THE ROBERT LANGDON NOVELS

Angels & Demons

ROME: An ancient secret brotherhood arises once more to launch a devastating new weapon against an unthinkable target . . .

'Heart-racing'
San Francisco Chronicle

The Da Vinci Code

PARIS: A quest almost as old as time itself for an object thought lost forever becomes a deadly race against the clock . . .

'Blockbuster perfection'
New York Times

Copyrighted Material

The Lost Symbol

The kidnapping of a friend will lead Langdon into the shadowy world of freemasonry and a hell-for-leather chase across Washington DC.

'So compelling that several times I came close to cardiac arrest . . . As perfectly constructed as the Washington architecture it escorts us around'
Sunday Express

Inferno

Robert Langdon races against time to try to save the world from a terrifying threat, armed only with a few lines from Dante's *Inferno* to help him.

'Jam-packed with tricks . . . A book-length scavenger hunt that Mr Brown creates so energetically'
New York Times

Origin

Langdon must follow a trail marked only by enigmatic symbols and elusive modern art to discover the truth about an astonishing scientific breakthrough, and come face-to-face with a breathtaking truth that has remained buried – until now.

'Fans will not be disappointed'
The Times

The Secret of Secrets

Robert Langdon must unlock the secrets of one of Europe's oldest cities to save the woman he loves . . .

Copyrighted Material

ACCLAIM FOR DAN BROWN'S NOVELS

'Wow . . . Blockbuster perfection . . . An exhilaratingly brainy thriller. Not since the advent of Harry Potter has an author so flagrantly delighted in leading readers on a breathless chase'
New York Times

'Adroitly blends the chase-scene stuffed thrillers of Robert Ludlum and the learned romps of Umberto Eco . . . For anyone who wants more brain-food than thrillers normally provide'
Sunday Times

'Exceedingly clever . . . Both fascinating and fun . . . a considerable achievement'
Washington Post

'A gripping bestseller . . . Brown has cracked the bestseller code'
Guardian

'Robert Langdon remains a terrific hero, a bookish intellectual who's cool in a crisis and quick on his feet . . . The codes are intriguing, the settings present often-seen locales in a fresh light, and Brown keeps the pages turning'
Entertainment Weekly

'Dan Brown is the master of the intellectual cliffhanger'
Wall Street Journal

'As engaging a hero as you could wish for'
Mail on Sunday

Copyrighted Material

DAN BROWN

DECEPTION POINT



PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com.

Penguin Random House UK, One Embassy Gardens,
8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk



Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in Great Britain in 2002 by Corgi
an imprint of Transworld Publishers
Corgi edition reissued 2009
Corgi edition reissued 2025

001

Copyright © Dan Brown 2001

The moral right of the author has been asserted

In this work of fiction, the characters, places and events are either the product of the author's imagination or they are used entirely fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Typeset in 11.03/13.2pt Palatino by Kestrel Data, Exeter, Devon.
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 9780552159722

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

Copyrighted Material



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

With warm thanks to Jason Kaufman for his superb guidance and insightful editorial skills; Blythe Brown for her tireless research and creative input; Bill Scott-Kerr for his enthusiasm for my work and for navigating it so expertly across the Atlantic; my good friend Jake Elwell at Wieser & Wieser; the National Security Archive; the NASA Public Affairs Office; Stan Planton, who continues to be a source for information on all things; the National Security Agency; glaciologist Martin O. Jeffries; and the superb minds of Brett Trotter, Thomas D. Nadeau, and Jim Barrington. Thanks also to Connie and Dick Brown, the U.S. Intelligence Policy Documentation Project, Suzanne O'Neill, Margie Wachtel, Morey Stettner, Owen King, Alison McKinnell, Mary and Stephen Gorman, Dr Karl Singer, Dr Michael I. Latz of Scripps Institute of Oceanography, April at Micron Electronics, Esther Sung, the National Air and Space Museum, Dr Gene Allmendinger, the incomparable Heide Lange at Sanford J. Greenburger Associates, and John Pike at the Federation of American Scientists.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The Delta Force, the National Reconnaissance Office, and the Space Frontier Foundation are real organizations. All technologies described in this novel exist.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

If this discovery is confirmed, it will surely be one of the most stunning insights into our universe that science has ever uncovered. Its implications are as far-reaching and awe-inspiring as can be imagined. Even as it promises answers to some of our oldest questions, it poses still others even more fundamental.

President Bill Clinton, in a press conference
following a discovery known as ALH84001
on August 7, 1996

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

PROLOGUE

Death, in this forsaken place, could come in countless forms. Geologist Charles Brophy had endured the savage splendor of this terrain for years, and yet nothing could prepare him for a fate as barbarous and unnatural as the one about to befall him.

As Brophy's four huskies pulled his sled of geologic sensing equipment across the tundra, the dogs suddenly slowed, looking skyward.

'What is it, girls?' Brophy asked, stepping off the sled.

Beyond the gathering storm clouds, a twin-rotor transport helicopter arched in low, hugging the glacial peaks with military dexterity.

That's odd, he thought. He never saw helicopters this far north. The aircraft landed fifty yards away, kicking up a stinging spray of granulated snow. His dogs whined, looking wary.

When the chopper doors slid open, two men descended. They were dressed in full-weather whites, armed with rifles, and moved toward Brophy with urgent intent.

'Dr Brophy?' one called.

The geologist was baffled. 'How did you know my name? Who are you?'

Copyrighted Material

'Take out your radio, please.'

'I'm sorry?'

'Just do it.'

Bewildered, Brophy pulled his radio from his parka.

'We need you to transmit an emergency communiqué. Decrease your radio frequency to one hundred kilohertz.'

One hundred kilohertz? Brophy felt utterly lost. *Nobody can receive anything that low*. 'Has there been an accident?'

The second man raised his rifle and pointed it at Brophy's head. 'There's no time to explain. Just do it.'

Trembling, Brophy adjusted his transmission frequency.

The first man now handed him a note card with a few lines typed on it. 'Transmit this message. Now.'

Brophy looked at the card. 'I don't understand. This information is incorrect. I didn't—'

The man pressed his rifle hard against the geologist's temple.

Brophy's voice was shaking as he transmitted the bizarre message.

'Good,' the first man said. 'Now get yourself and your dogs into the chopper.'

At gunpoint, Brophy maneuvered his reluctant dogs and sled up a skid ramp into the cargo bay. As soon as they were settled, the chopper lifted off, turning westward.

'Who the hell are you?' Brophy demanded, breaking a sweat inside his parka. *And what was the meaning of that message?*

The men said nothing.

As the chopper gained altitude, the wind tore

Copyrighted Material

through the open door. Brophy's four huskies, still rigged to the loaded sled, were whimpering now.

'At least close the door,' Brophy demanded. 'Can't you see my dogs are frightened!'

The men did not respond.

As the chopper rose to 4,000 feet, it banked steeply out over a series of ice chasms and crevasses. Suddenly, the men stood. Without a word, they gripped the heavily laden sled and pushed it out the open door. Brophy watched in horror as his dogs scrambled in vain against the enormous weight. In an instant the animals disappeared, dragged howling out of the chopper.

Brophy was already on his feet screaming when the men grabbed him. They hauled him to the door. Numb with fear, Brophy swung his fists, trying to fend off the powerful hands pushing him outward.

It was no use. Moments later he was tumbling toward the chasms below.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

1

Toulos Restaurant, adjacent to Capitol Hill, boasts a politically incorrect menu of baby veal and horse carpaccio, making it an ironic hotspot for the quintessential Washingtonian power breakfast. This morning Toulos was busy – a cacophony of clanking silverware, espresso machines, and cellphone conversations.

The maitre d' was sneaking a sip of his morning Bloody Mary when the woman entered. He turned with a practiced smile.

'Good morning,' he said. 'May I help you?'

The woman was attractive, in her mid-thirties, wearing gray, pleated flannel pants, conservative flats, and an ivory Laura Ashley blouse. Her posture was straight – chin raised ever so slightly – not arrogant, just strong. The woman's hair was light brown and fashioned in Washington's most popular style – the 'anchorwoman' – a lush feathering, curled under at the shoulders . . . long enough to be sexy, but short enough to remind you she was probably smarter than you.

'I'm a little late,' the woman said, her voice unassuming. 'I have a breakfast meeting with Senator Sexton.'

Copyrighted Material

The maitre d' felt an unexpected tingle of nerves. *Senator Sedgewick Sexton*. The senator was a regular here and currently one of the country's most famous men. Last week, having swept all twelve Republican primaries on Super Tuesday, the senator was virtually guaranteed his party's nomination for President of the United States. Many believed the senator had a superb chance of stealing the White House from the embattled President next fall. Lately Sexton's face seemed to be on every national magazine, his campaign slogan plastered all across America: 'Stop spending. Start mending.'

'Senator Sexton is in his booth,' the maitre d' said. 'And you are?'

'Rachel Sexton. His daughter.'

How foolish of me, he thought. The resemblance was quite apparent. The woman had the senator's penetrating eyes and refined carriage – that polished air of resilient nobility. Clearly the senator's classic good looks had not skipped generations, although Rachel Sexton seemed to carry her blessings with a grace and humility her father could learn from.

'A pleasure to have you, Ms Sexton.'

As the maitre d' led the senator's daughter across the dining area, he was embarrassed by the gauntlet of male eyes following her . . . some discreet, others less so. Few women dined at Toulos and even fewer who looked like Rachel Sexton.

'Nice body,' one diner whispered. 'Sexton already find himself a new wife?'

'That's his daughter, you idiot,' another replied.

The man chuckled. 'Knowing Sexton, he'd probably screw her anyway.'

* * *

Copyrighted Material

When Rachel arrived at her father's table, the senator was on his cellphone talking loudly about one of his recent successes. He glanced up at Rachel only long enough to tap his Cartier and remind her she was late.

I missed you, too, Rachel thought.

Her father's first name was Thomas, although he'd adopted his middle name long ago. Rachel suspected it was because he liked the alliteration. Senator Sedgewick Sexton. The man was a silver-haired, silver-tongued political animal who had been anointed with the slick look of a soap opera doctor, which seemed appropriate considering his talents of impersonation.

'Rachel!' Her father clicked off his phone and stood to kiss her cheek.

'Hi, Dad.' She did not kiss him back.

'You look exhausted.'

And so it begins, she thought. 'I got your message. What's up?'

'I can't ask my daughter out for breakfast?'

Rachel had learned long ago her father seldom requested her company unless he had some ulterior motive.

Sexton took a sip of coffee. 'So, how are things with you?'

'Busy. I see your campaign's going well.'

'Oh, let's not talk business.' Sexton leaned across the table, lowering his voice. 'How's that guy at the State Department I set you up with?'

Rachel exhaled, already fighting the urge to check her watch. 'Dad, I really haven't had time to call him. And I wish you'd stop trying to—'

'You've got to make time for the important things, Rachel. Without love, everything else is meaningless.'

A number of comebacks came to mind, but Rachel

Copyrighted Material

chose silence. Being the bigger person was not difficult when it came to her father. 'Dad, you wanted to see me? You said this was important.'

'It is.' Her father's eyes studied her closely.

Rachel felt part of her defenses melt away under his gaze, and she cursed the man's power. The senator's eyes were his gift – a gift Rachel suspected would probably carry him to the White House. On cue, his eyes would well with tears, and then, an instant later, they would clear, opening a window to an impassioned soul, extending a bond of trust to all. *It's all about trust*, her father always said. The senator had lost Rachel's years ago, but he was quickly gaining the country's.

'I have a proposition for you,' Senator Sexton said.

'Let me guess,' Rachel replied, attempting to refortify her position. 'Some prominent divorcé looking for a young wife?'

'Don't kid yourself, honey. You're not that young anymore.'

Rachel felt the familiar shrinking sensation that so often accompanied meetings with her father.

'I want to throw you a life raft,' he said.

'I wasn't aware I was drowning.'

'You're not. The President is. You should jump ship before it's too late.'

'Haven't we had this conversation?'

'Think about your future, Rachel. You can come work for me.'

'I hope that's not why you asked me to breakfast.'

The senator's veneer of calm broke ever so slightly. 'Rachel, can't you see that your working for him reflects badly on me? And on my campaign.'

Rachel sighed. She and her father had been through this. 'Dad, I don't work for the President. I haven't

Copyrighted Material

even *met* the President. I work in Fairfax, for God's sake!'

'Politics is perception, Rachel. It *appears* you work for the President.'

Rachel exhaled, trying to keep her cool. 'I worked too hard to get this job, Dad. I'm not quitting.'

The senator's eyes narrowed. 'You know, sometimes your selfish attitude really—'

'Senator Sexton?' A reporter materialized beside the table.

Sexton's demeanor thawed instantly. Rachel groaned and took a croissant from the basket on the table.

'Ralph Sneeden,' the reporter said. '*Washington Post*. May I ask you a few questions?'

The senator smiled, dabbing his mouth with a napkin. 'My pleasure, Ralph. Just make it quick. I don't want my coffee getting cold.'

The reporter laughed on cue. 'Of course, sir.' He pulled out a minirecorder and turned it on. 'Senator, your television ads call for legislation ensuring equal salaries for women in the workplace . . . as well as for tax cuts for new families. Can you comment on your rationale?'

'Sure. I'm simply a huge fan of strong women and strong families.'

Rachel practically choked on her croissant.

'And on the subject of families,' the reporter followed up, 'you talk a lot about education. You've proposed some highly controversial budget cuts in an effort to allocate more funds to our nation's schools.'

'I believe the children are our future.'

Rachel could not believe her father had sunk to quoting pop songs.

'Finally, sir,' the reporter said, 'you've taken an

Copyrighted Material

enormous jump in the polls these past few weeks. The President has got to be worried. Any thoughts on your recent success?'

'I think it has to do with trust. Americans are starting to see that the President cannot be trusted to make the tough decisions facing this nation. Runaway government spending is putting this country deeper in debt every day, and Americans are starting to realize that it's time to stop spending and start mending.'

Like a stay of execution from her father's rhetoric, the pager in Rachel's handbag went off. Normally the harsh electronic beeping was an unwelcome interruption, but at the moment, it sounded almost melodious.

The senator glared indignantly at having been interrupted.

Rachel fished the pager from her handbag and pressed a preset sequence of five buttons, confirming that she was indeed the person holding the pager. The beeping stopped, and the LCD began blinking. In fifteen seconds she would receive a secure text message.

Sneeden grinned at the senator. 'Your daughter is obviously a busy woman. It's refreshing to see you two still find time in your schedules to dine together.'

'As I said, family comes first.'

Sneeden nodded, and then his gaze hardened. 'Might I ask, sir, how you and your daughter manage your conflicts of interest?'

'Conflicts?' Senator Sexton cocked his head with an innocent look of confusion. 'What conflicts do you mean?'

Rachel glanced up, grimacing at her father's act. She knew exactly where this was headed. *Damn reporters*, she thought. Half of them were on political payrolls.

Copyrighted Material

The reporter's question was what journalists called a *grapefruit* – a question that was supposed to look like a tough inquiry but was in fact a scripted favor to the senator – a slow lob pitch that her father could line up and smash out of the park, clearing the air about a few things.

'Well, sir . . .' The reporter coughed, feigning uneasiness over the question. 'The conflict is that your daughter works for your opponent.'

Senator Sexton exploded in laughter, defusing the question instantly. 'Ralph, first of all, the President and I are not *opponents*. We are simply two patriots who have different ideas about how to run the country we love.'

The reporter beamed. He had his sound bite. 'And second?'

'Second, my daughter is not employed by the President; she is employed by the intelligence community. She compiles intel reports and sends them to the White House. It's a fairly low-level position.' He paused and looked at Rachel. 'In fact, dear, I'm not sure you've even *met* the President, have you?'

Rachel stared, her eyes smoldering.

The beeper chirped, drawing Rachel's gaze to the incoming message on the LCD screen.

– RPRT DIRNRO STAT –

She deciphered the shorthand instantly and frowned. The message was unexpected, and most certainly bad news. At least she had her exit cue.

'Gentlemen,' she said. 'It breaks my heart, but I have to go. I'm late for work.'

'Ms Sexton,' the reporter said quickly, 'before you go, I was wondering if you could comment on the rumors that you called this breakfast meeting to discuss the

Copyrighted Material

possibility of leaving your current post to work for your father's campaign?'

Rachel felt like someone had thrown hot coffee in her face. The question took her totally off guard. She looked at her father and sensed in his smirk that the question had been prepped. She wanted to climb across the table and stab him with a fork.

The reporter shoved the recorder into her face. 'Miss Sexton?'

Rachel locked eyes with the reporter. 'Ralph, or whoever the hell you are, get this straight: I have no intention of abandoning my job to work for Senator Sexton, and if you print anything to the contrary, you'll need a shoehorn to get that recorder out of your ass.'

The reporter's eyes widened. He clicked off his recorder, hiding a grin. 'Thank you both.' He disappeared.

Rachel immediately regretted the outburst. She had inherited her father's temper, and she hated him for it. *Smooth, Rachel, Very smooth*.

Her father glared disapprovingly. 'You'd do well to learn some poise.'

Rachel began collecting her things. 'This meeting is over.'

The senator was apparently done with her anyway. He pulled out his cellphone to make a call. ''Bye, sweetie. Stop by the office one of these days and say hello. And get married, for God's sake. You're thirty-three years old.'

'Thirty-*four*,' she snapped. 'Your secretary sent a card.'

He clucked ruefully. 'Thirty-four. Almost an old maid. You know by the time I was thirty-four, I'd already—'

Copyrighted Material

'Married Mom and screwed the neighbor?' The words came out louder than Rachel had intended, her voice hanging naked in an ill-timed lull. Diners nearby glanced over.

Senator Sexton's eyes flash-froze, two ice-crystals boring into her. 'You watch yourself, young lady.'

Rachel headed for the door. *No, you watch yourself, Senator*.

2

The three men sat in silence inside their ThermaTech storm tent. Outside, an icy wind buffeted the shelter, threatening to tear it from its moorings. None of the men took notice; each had seen situations far more threatening than this one.

Their tent was stark white, pitched in a shallow depression, out of sight. Their communication devices, transport, and weapons were all state-of-the-art. The group leader was code-named Delta-One. He was muscular and lithe with eyes as desolate as the topography on which he was stationed.

The military chronograph on Delta-One's wrist emitted a sharp beep. The sound coincided in perfect unison with beeps emitted from the chronographs worn by the other two men.

Another thirty minutes had passed.

It was time. Again.

Reflexively, Delta-One left his two partners and stepped outside into the darkness and pounding wind. He scanned the moonlit horizon with infrared

Copyrighted Material

binoculars. As always, he focused on the structure. It was 1,000 meters away – an enormous and unlikely edifice rising from the barren terrain. He and his team had been watching it for ten days now, since its construction. Delta-One had no doubt that the information inside would change the world. Lives already had been lost to protect it.

At the moment, everything looked quiet outside the structure.

The true test, however, was what was happening *inside*.

Delta-One reentered the tent and addressed his two fellow soldiers. 'Time for a flyby.'

Both men nodded. The taller of them, Delta-Two, opened a laptop computer and turned it on. Positioning himself in front of the screen, Delta-Two placed his hand on a mechanical joystick and gave it a short jerk. A thousand meters away, hidden deep within the building, a surveillance robot the size of a mosquito received his transmission and sprang to life.

3

Rachel Sexton was still steaming as she drove her white Integra up Leesburg Highway. The bare maples of the Falls Church foothills rose stark against a crisp March sky, but the peaceful setting did little to calm her anger. Her father's recent surge in the polls should have endowed him with a modicum of confident grace, and yet it seemed only to fuel his self-importance.

The man's deceit was doubly painful because he was

Copyrighted Material

the only immediate family Rachel had left. Rachel's mother had died three years ago, a devastating loss whose emotional scars still raked at Rachel's heart. Rachel's only solace was knowing that the death, with ironic compassion, had liberated her mother from a deep despair over a miserable marriage to the senator.

Rachel's pager beeped again, pulling her thoughts back to the road in front of her. The incoming message was the same.

– RPRT DIRNRO STAT –

Report to the director of NRO stat. She sighed. *I'm coming, for God's sake!*

With rising uncertainty, Rachel drove to her usual exit, turned onto the private access road, and rolled to a stop at the heavily armed sentry booth. This was 14225 Leesburg Highway, one of the most secretive addresses in the country.

While the guard scanned her car for bugs, Rachel gazed out at the mammoth structure in the distance. The 1,000,000-square-foot complex sat majestically on 68 forested acres just outside D.C. in Fairfax, Virginia. The building's facade was a bastion of one-way glass that reflected the army of satellite dishes, antennas, and rayodomes on the surrounding grounds, doubling their already awe-inspiring numbers.

Two minutes later, Rachel had parked and crossed the manicured grounds to the main entrance, where a carved granite sign announced

NATIONAL RECONNAISSANCE OFFICE (NRO)

The two armed Marines flanking the bulletproof revolving door stared straight ahead as Rachel passed between them. She felt the same sensation she always

Copyrighted Material

felt as she pushed through these doors . . . that she was entering the belly of a sleeping giant.

Inside the vaulted lobby, Rachel sensed the faint echoes of hushed conversations all around her, as if the words were sifting down from the offices above. An enormous tiled mosaic proclaimed the NRO directive:

ENABLING U.S. GLOBAL INFORMATION SUPERIORITY,
DURING PEACE AND THROUGH WAR.

The walls here were lined with massive photographs – rocket launches, submarine christenings, intercept installations – towering achievements that could be celebrated only within these walls.

Now, as always, Rachel felt the problems of the outside world fading behind her. She was entering the shadow world. A world where the problems thundered in like freight trains, and the solutions were meted out with barely a whisper.

As Rachel approached the final checkpoint, she wondered what kind of problem had caused her pager to ring twice in the last thirty minutes.

'Good morning, Ms Sexton.' The guard smiled as she approached the steel doorway.

Rachel returned the smile as the guard held out a tiny swab for Rachel to take.

'You know the drill,' he said.

Rachel took the hermetically sealed cotton swab and removed the plastic covering. Then she placed it in her mouth like a thermometer. She held it under her tongue for two seconds. Then, leaning forward, she allowed the guard to remove it. The guard inserted the moistened swab into a slit in a machine behind him. The machine took four seconds to confirm the DNA

Copyrighted Material

sequences in Rachel's saliva. Then a monitor flickered on, displaying Rachel's photo and security clearance.

The guard winked. 'Looks like you're still you.' He pulled the used swab from the machine and dropped it through an opening, where it was instantly incinerated. 'Have a good one.' He pressed a button and the huge steel doors swung open.

As Rachel made her way into the maze of bustling corridors beyond, she was amazed that even after six years here she was still daunted by the colossal scope of this operation. The agency encompassed six other U.S. installations, employed over ten thousand agents, and had operating costs of over $10 billion per year.

In total secrecy, the NRO built and maintained an astonishing arsenal of cutting-edge spy technologies: worldwide electronic intercepts; spy satellites; silent, embedded relay chips in telecomm products; even a global naval-recon network known as Classic Wizard, a secret web of 1,456 hydrophones mounted on sea-floors around the world, capable of monitoring ship movements anywhere on the globe.

NRO technologies not only helped the United States win military conflicts, but they provided an endless stream of peacetime data to agencies such as the CIA, NSA, and Department of Defense, helping them thwart terrorism, locate crimes against the environment, and give policymakers the data needed to make informed decisions on an enormous array of topics.

Rachel worked here as a 'gister.' Gisting, or data reduction, required analyzing complex reports and distilling their essence or 'gist' into concise, single-page briefs. Rachel had proven herself a natural. *All those years of cutting through my father's bullshit*, she thought.

Rachel now held the NRO's premiere gisting post –

Copyrighted Material

intelligence liaison to the White House. She was responsible for sifting through the NRO's daily intelligence reports, deciding which stories were relevant to the President, distilling those reports into single-page briefs, and then forwarding the synopsized material to the President's National Security Adviser. In NRO-speak, Rachel Sexton 'manufactured finished product and serviced *the* customer.'

Although the job was difficult and required long hours, the position was a badge of honor for her, a way to assert her independence from her father. Senator Sexton had offered countless times to support Rachel if she would quit the post, but Rachel had no intention of becoming financially beholden to a man like Sedgewick Sexton. Her mother was testimony to what could happen when a man like that held too many cards.

The sound of Rachel's pager echoed in the marble hall.

Again? She didn't even bother to check the message.

Wondering what the hell was going on, she boarded the elevator, skipped her own floor, and went straight to the top.

4

To call the NRO director a plain man was in itself an overstatement. NRO Director William Pickering was diminutive, with pale skin, a forgettable face, a bald head, and hazel eyes, which despite having gazed upon the country's deepest secrets, appeared as two shallow

Copyrighted Material

pools. Nonetheless, to those who worked under him, Pickering towered. His subdued personality and unadorned philosophies were legendary at the NRO. The man's quiet diligence, combined with his wardrobe of plain black suits, had earned him the nickname the 'Quaker.' A brilliant strategist and the model of efficiency, the Quaker ran his world with an unrivaled clarity. His mantra: 'Find the truth. Act on it.'

When Rachel arrived in the director's office, he was on the phone. Rachel was always surprised by the sight of him: William Pickering looked nothing like a man who wielded enough power to wake the President at any hour.

Pickering hung up and waved her in. 'Agent Sexton, have a seat.' His voice had a lucid rawness to it.

'Thank you, sir.' Rachel sat.

Despite most people's discomfort around William Pickering's blunt demeanor, Rachel had always liked the man. He was the exact antithesis of her father . . . physically unimposing, anything but charismatic, and he did his duty with a selfless patriotism, shunning the spotlight her father loved so much.

Pickering removed his glasses and gazed at her. 'Agent Sexton, the President called me about a half hour ago. In direct reference to you.'

Rachel shifted in her seat. Pickering was known for getting to the point. *One hell of an opening*, she thought. 'Not a problem with one of my gists, I hope.'

'On the contrary. He says the White House is impressed with your work.'

Rachel exhaled silently. 'So what did he want?'

'A meeting with you. In person. Immediately.'

Rachel's unease sharpened. 'A personal meeting? About *what*?'

Copyrighted Material

'Damn good question. He wouldn't tell me.'

Now Rachel was lost. Keeping information from the director of the NRO was like keeping Vatican secrets from the Pope. The standing joke in the intelligence community was that if William Pickering didn't know about it, it hadn't happened.

Pickering stood, pacing now in front of his window. 'He asked that I contact you immediately and send you to meet with him.'

'Right now?'

'He sent transportation. It's waiting outside.'

Rachel frowned. The President's request was unnerving on its own account, but it was the look of concern on Pickering's face that really worried her. 'You obviously have reservations.'

'I sure as hell do!' Pickering showed a rare flash of emotion. 'The President's timing seems almost callow in its transparency. You are the daughter of the man who is currently challenging him in the polls, and he demands a private meeting with you? I find this highly inappropriate. Your father no doubt would agree.'

Rachel knew Pickering was right – not that she gave a damn what her father thought. 'Do you not trust the President's motives?'

'My oath is to provide intel support to the current White House administration, not pass judgment on their politics.'

Typical Pickering response, Rachel realized. William Pickering made no bones about his view of politicians as transitory figureheads who passed fleetingly across a chessboard whose real players were men like Pickering himself – seasoned 'lifers' who had been around long enough to understand the game with some perspective. Two full terms in the White House, Pickering often

Copyrighted Material

said, was not nearly enough to comprehend the true complexities of the global political landscape.

'Maybe it's an innocent request,' Rachel offered, hoping the President was above trying some sort of cheap campaign stunt. 'Maybe he needs a reduction of some sensitive data.'

'Not to sound belittling, Agent Sexton, but the White House has access to plenty of qualified gisting personnel if they need it. If it's an internal White House job, the President should know better than to contact you. And if not, then he sure as hell should know better than to request an NRO asset and then refuse to tell me what he wants it for.'

Pickering always referred to his employees as assets, a manner of speech many found disconcertingly cold.

'Your father is gaining political momentum,' Pickering said. 'A *lot* of it. The White House has got to be getting nervous.' He sighed. 'Politics is a desperate business. When the President calls a secret meeting with his challenger's daughter, I'd guess there's more on his mind than intelligence gists.'

Rachel felt a distant chill. Pickering's hunches had an uncanny tendency to be dead on. 'And you're afraid the White House feels desperate enough to introduce *me* into the political mix?'

Pickering paused a moment. 'You are not exactly silent about your feelings for your father, and I have little doubt the President's campaign staff is aware of the rift. It occurs to me that they may want to use you against him somehow.'

'Where do I sign up?' Rachel said, only half joking.

Pickering looked unimpressed. He gave her a stern stare. 'A word of warning, Agent Sexton. If you feel that your personal issues with your father are going to cloud

Copyrighted Material

your judgment in dealing with the President, I strongly advise that you decline the President's request for a meeting.'

'Decline?' Rachel gave a nervous chuckle. 'I obviously can't refuse the President.'

'No,' the director said, 'but I can.'

His words rumbled a bit, reminding Rachel of the other reason Pickering was called the 'Quaker.' Despite being a small man, William Pickering could cause political earthquakes if he were crossed.

'My concerns here are simple,' Pickering said. 'I have a responsibility to protect the people who work for me, and I don't appreciate even the vague implication that one of them might be used as a pawn in a political game.'

'What do you recommend I do?'

Pickering sighed. 'My suggestion is that you meet with him. Commit to nothing. Once the President tells you what the hell is on his mind, call me. If I think he's playing political hardball with you, trust me, I'll pull you out so fast the man won't know what hit him.'

'Thank you, sir.' Rachel sensed a protective aura from the director that she often longed for in her own father. 'And you said the President already sent a car?'

'Not exactly.' Pickering frowned and pointed out the window.

Uncertain, Rachel went over and gazed out in the direction of Pickering's outstretched finger.

A snub-nosed MH-60G PaveHawk helicopter sat idling on the lawn. One of the fastest choppers ever made, this PaveHawk was emblazoned with the White House insignia. The pilot stood nearby, checking his watch.

Rachel turned to Pickering in disbelief. 'The White

Copyrighted Material

House sent a *PaveHawk* to take me fifteen miles into D.C.?'

'Apparently the President hopes you are either impressed or intimidated.' Pickering eyed her. 'I suggest you are neither.'

Rachel nodded. She was both.

Four minutes later, Rachel Sexton exited the NRO and climbed into the waiting helicopter. Before she had even buckled herself in, the craft was airborne, banking hard across the Virginia woods. Rachel gazed out at the blur of trees beneath her and felt her pulse rising. It would have risen faster had she known this chopper would never reach the White House.

5

The frigid wind battered the fabric of the ThermaTech tent, but Delta-One hardly noticed. He and Delta-Three were focused on their comrade, who was manipulating the joystick in his hand with surgical dexterity. The screen before them displayed a live video transmission from a pinpoint camera mounted aboard the microrobot.

The ultimate surveillance tool, Delta-One thought, still amazed every time they powered it up. Lately, in the world of micromechanics, fact seemed to be outpacing fiction.

Micro Electro Mechanical Systems (MEMS) – microbots – were the newest tool in high-tech surveillance – 'fly on the wall technology,' they called it.

Copyrighted Material

Literally.

Although microscopic, remote-controlled robots sounded like science fiction, in fact they had been around since the 1990s. *Discovery* magazine had run a cover story in May 1997 on microbots, featuring both 'flying' and 'swimming' models. The swimmers – nanosubs the size of salt grains – could be injected into the human bloodstream *à la* the movie *Fantastic Voyage*. They were now being used by advanced medical facilities to help doctors navigate arteries by remote control, observe live intravenous video transmissions, and locate arterial blockages without ever lifting a scalpel.

Contrary to intuition, building a *flying* microbot was an even simpler business. The aerodynamics technology for getting a machine to fly had been around since Kittyhawk, and all that remained had been the issue of miniaturization. The first flying microbots, designed by NASA as unmanned exploration tools for future Mars missions, had been several inches long. Now, however, advances in nanotechnology, lightweight energy-absorbent materials, and micromechanics had made the flying microbots a reality.

The true breakthrough had come from the new field biomimics – copying Mother Nature. Miniature dragonflies, as it turned out, were the ideal prototype for these agile and efficient flying microbots. The PH2 model Delta-Two was currently flying was only one centimeter long – the size of a *mosquito* – and employed a dual pair of transparent, hinged, silicon-leaf wings, giving it unparalleled mobility and efficiency in the air.

The microbot's refueling mechanism had been another breakthrough. The first microbot prototypes could only recharge their energy cells by hovering

Copyrighted Material

directly beneath a bright light source, not ideal for stealth or use in dark locales. The newer prototypes, however, could recharge simply by parking within a few inches of a magnetic field. Conveniently, in modern society, magnetic fields were ubiquitous and discreetly placed – power outlets, computer monitors, electric motors, audio speakers, cellphones – it seemed there was never any shortage of obscure recharging stations. Once a microbot had been introduced successfully into a locale, it could transmit audio and video almost indefinitely. The Delta Force's PH2 had been transmitting for over a week now with no trouble whatsoever.

Now, like an insect hovering inside a cavernous barn, the airborne microbot hung silently in the still air of the structure's massive central room. With a bird's-eye view of the space below, the microbot circled silently above unsuspecting occupants – technicians, scientists, specialists in countless fields of study. As the PH2 circled, Delta-One spotted two familiar faces engaged in conversation. They would be a telling mark. He told Delta-Two to drop down and have a listen.

Manipulating the controls, Delta-Two switched on the robot's sound sensors, oriented the microbot's parabolic amplifier, and decreased the robot's elevation until it was ten feet over the scientists' heads. The transmission was faint, but discernible.

'I still can't believe it,' one scientist was saying. The excitement in his voice had not diminished since his arrival here forty-eight hours ago.

The man with whom he was talking obviously shared the enthusiasm. 'In your lifetime . . . did you ever think you would witness anything like this?'

Copyrighted Material

'Never,' the scientist replied, beaming. 'It's all a magnificent dream.'

Delta-One had heard enough. Clearly everything inside was proceeding as expected. Delta-Two maneuvered the microbot away from the conversation and flew it back to its hiding place. He parked the tiny device undetected near the cylinder of an electric generator. The PH2's power cells immediately began recharging for the next mission.

6

Rachel Sexton's thoughts were lost in the morning's bizarre developments as her PaveHawk transport tore across the morning sky, and it was not until the helicopter rocketed out across Chesapeake Bay that she realized they were heading in entirely the wrong direction. The initial flash of confusion instantly gave way to trepidation.

'Hey!' she yelled to the pilot. 'What are you doing?' Her voice was barely audible over the rotors. 'You're supposed to be taking me to the White House!'

The pilot shook his head. 'Sorry, ma'am. The President is not at the White House this morning.'

Rachel tried to remember if Pickering had specifically mentioned the White House or whether she had simply assumed. 'So where is the President?'

'Your meeting with him is elsewhere.'

No shit. 'Where elsewhere?'

'Not far now.'

'That's not what I asked.'

Copyrighted Material

'Sixteen more miles.'

Rachel scowled at him. *This guy should be a politician*. 'Do you dodge bullets as well as you dodge questions?'

The pilot did not answer.

It took less than seven minutes for the chopper to cross the Chesapeake. When land was in sight again, the pilot banked north and skirted a narrow peninsula, where Rachel saw a series of runways and military-looking buildings. The pilot dropped down toward them, and Rachel then realized what this place was. The six launchpads and charred rocket towers were a good clue, but if that was not enough, the roof of one of the buildings had been painted with two enormous words: WALLOPS ISLAND.

Wallops Island was one of NASA's oldest launch sites. Still used today for satellite launches and testing of experimental aircraft, Wallops was NASA's base away from the spotlight.

The President is at Wallops Island? It made no sense.

The chopper pilot aligned his trajectory with a series of three runways that ran the length of the narrow peninsula. They seemed to be heading for the far end of the center runway.

The pilot began to slow. 'You will be meeting the President in his office.'

Rachel turned, wondering if the guy was joking. 'The President of the United States has an office on Wallops Island?'

The pilot looked dead serious. 'The President of the United States has an office wherever he likes, ma'am.'

He pointed toward the end of the runway. Rachel saw the mammoth shape glistening in the distance, and her heart almost stopped. Even at 300 yards,

Copyrighted Material

she recognized the light blue hull of the modified 747.

'I'm meeting him aboard the . . .'

'Yes, ma'am. His home away from home.'

Rachel stared out at the massive aircraft. The military's cryptic designation for this prestigious plane was VC-25-A, although the rest of the world knew it by another name: Air Force One.

'Looks like you're in the *new* one this morning,' the pilot said, motioning to the numbers on the plane's tail fin.

Rachel nodded blankly. Few Americans knew that there were actually two Air Force Ones in service – a pair of identical, specially configured 747-200-Bs, one with the tail number 28000 and the other 29000. Both planes had cruising speeds of 600 mph and had been modified for in-flight refueling, giving them virtually unlimited range.

As the PaveHawk settled onto the runway beside the President's plane, Rachel now understood the references to Air Force One being the commander-in-chief's 'portable home court advantage.' The machine was an intimidating sight.

When the President flew to other countries to meet heads of state, he often requested – for security purposes – that the meeting take place on the runway aboard his jet. Although some of the motives were security, certainly another incentive was to gain a negotiating edge through raw intimidation. A visit to Air Force One was far more intimidating than any trip to the White House. The six-foot-high letters along the fuselage trumpeted 'UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.' A female English cabinet member had once accused President Nixon of 'waving his manhood in her face'

Copyrighted Material

when he asked her to join him aboard Air Force One. Later the crew jokingly nicknamed the plane 'Big Dick.'

'Ms Sexton?' A blazer-clad Secret Serviceman materialized outside the chopper and opened the door for her. 'The President is waiting for you.'

Rachel got out of the chopper and gazed up the steep gangway at the bulging hull. *Into the flying phallus*. She had once heard the flying 'Oval Office' had over four thousand square feet of interior floor space, including four separate private sleeping quarters, berths for a twenty-six-member flight crew, and two galleys capable of providing food for fifty people.

Climbing the stairway, Rachel felt the Secret Serviceman on her heels, urging her upward. High above, the cabin door stood open like a tiny puncture wound on the side of a gargantuan silver whale. She moved toward the darkened entryway and felt her confidence starting to ebb.

Easy, Rachel. It's just a plane.

On the landing, the Secret Serviceman politely took her arm and guided her into a surprisingly narrow corridor. They turned right, walked a short distance, and emerged into a luxurious and spacious cabin. Rachel immediately recognized it from photographs.

'Wait here,' the serviceman said, and he disappeared.

Rachel stood alone in Air Force One's famous wood-paneled fore cabin. This was the room used for meetings, entertaining dignitaries, and, apparently, for scaring the hell out of first-time passengers. The room spanned the entire width of the plane, as did its thick tan carpeting. The furnishings were impeccable – cordovan leather armchairs around a bird's-eye maple meeting table, burnished brass floor lamps beside a

Copyrighted Material

continental sofa, and hand-etched crystal glassware on a mahogany wet bar.

Supposedly, Boeing designers had carefully laid out this fore cabin to provide passengers with 'a sense of order mixed with tranquility.' Tranquility, however, was the last thing Rachel Sexton was feeling at the moment. The only thing she could think of was the number of world leaders who had sat in this very room and made decisions that shaped the world.

Everything about this room said power, from the faint aroma of fine pipe tobacco to the ubiquitous presidential seal. The eagle clasping the arrows and olive branches was embroidered on throw pillows, carved into the ice bucket, and even printed on the cork coasters on the bar. Rachel picked up a coaster and examined it.

'Stealing souvenirs already?' a deep voice asked behind her.

Startled, Rachel wheeled, dropping the coaster on the floor. She knelt awkwardly to retrieve it. As she grasped the coaster, she turned to see the President of the United States gazing down at her with an amused grin.

'I'm not royalty, Ms Sexton. There's really no need to kneel.'

7

Senator Sedgewick Sexton savored the privacy of his Lincoln stretch limousine as it snaked through Washington's morning traffic toward his office. Across

Copyrighted Material

from him, Gabrielle Ashe, his twenty-four-year-old personal assistant, read him his daily schedule. Sexton was barely listening.

I love Washington, he thought, admiring the assistant's perfect shape beneath her cashmere sweater. *Power is the greatest aphrodisiac of all . . . and it brings women like this to D.C. in droves*.

Gabrielle was a New York Ivy Leaguer with dreams of being a senator herself one day. *She'll make it too*, Sexton thought. She was incredible-looking and sharp as a whip. Above all, she understood the rules of the game.

Gabrielle Ashe was black, but her tawny coloring was more of a deep cinnamon or mahogany, the kind of comfortable in-between that Sexton knew bleeding heart 'whites' could endorse without feeling like they were giving away the farm. Sexton described Gabrielle to his cronies as Halle Berry's looks with Hillary Clinton's brains and ambition, although sometimes he thought even that was an understatement.

Gabrielle had been a tremendous asset to his campaign since he'd promoted her to his personal campaign assistant three months ago. And to top it all off, she was working for free. Her compensation for a sixteen-hour workday was learning the ropes in the trenches with a seasoned politician.

Of course, Sexton gloated, *I've persuaded her to do a bit more than just work*. After promoting Gabrielle, Sexton had invited her to a late night 'orientation session' in his private office. As expected, his young assistant arrived starstruck and eager to please. With a slow-moving patience mastered over decades, Sexton worked his magic . . . building up Gabrielle's trust, carefully stripping away her inhibitions, exhibiting

Copyrighted Material

tantalizing control, and finally seducing her right there in his office.

Sexton had little doubt the encounter had been one of the most sexually gratifying experiences of the young woman's life, and yet, in the light of the day, Gabrielle clearly regretted the indiscretion. Embarrassed, she offered to resign. Sexton refused. Gabrielle stayed on, but she made her intentions very clear. The relationship had been strictly business ever since.

Gabrielle's pouty lips were still moving. '. . . don't want you to be lackadaisical going into this CNN debate this afternoon. We still don't know who the White House is sending as opposition. You'll want to peruse these notes I typed.' She handed him a folder.

Sexton took the folder, savoring the scent of her perfume mixed with the plush leather seats.

'You aren't listening,' she said.

'Certainly am.' He grinned. 'Forget about this CNN debate. Worse case scenario, the White House snubs me by sending some low-level campaign intern. Best case scenario, they send a bigwig, and I eat him for lunch.'

Gabrielle frowned. 'Fine. I've included a list of the most probable hostile topics in your notes.'

'The usual suspects no doubt.'

'With one new entry. I think you might face some hostile backlash from the gay community for your comments last night on *Larry King*.'

Sexton shrugged, barely listening. 'Right. The same-sex marriage thing.'

Gabrielle gave him a disapproving look. 'You *did* come out against it pretty strongly.'

Same-sex marriages, Sexton thought in disgust. *If it were up to me, the faggots wouldn't even have the right to vote*. 'Okay, I'll turn it down a notch.'

Copyrighted Material

'Good. You've been pushing the envelope a bit on some of these hot topics lately. Don't get cocky. The public can turn in an instant. You're gaining now, and you have momentum. Just ride it out. There's no need to hit the ball out of the park today. Just keep it in play.'

'Any news from the White House?'

Gabrielle looked pleasantly baffled. 'Continued silence. It's official; your opponent has become the "Invisible Man." '

Sexton could barely believe his good fortune lately. For months, the President had been working hard on the campaign trail. Then suddenly, a week ago, he had locked himself in the Oval Office, and nobody had seen or heard from him since. It was as if the President simply could not face Sexton's groundswell of voter support.

Gabrielle ran a hand through her straightened black hair. 'I hear the White House campaign staff is as confused as we are. The President is offering no explanation for his vanishing act, and everyone over there is furious.'

'Any theories?' Sexton asked.

Gabrielle gazed at him over her scholarly glasses. 'As it turns out, I got some interesting data this morning from a contact of mine in the White House.'

Sexton recognized the look in her eyes. Gabrielle Ashe had scored some insider information again. Sexton wondered if she were giving some presidential aide backseat blow jobs in exchange for campaign secrets. Sexton didn't care . . . so long as the information kept coming.

'Rumor has it,' his assistant said, lowering her voice, 'the President's strange behavior all started last week after an emergency private briefing with the

Copyrighted Material

administrator of NASA. Apparently the President emerged from the meeting looking dazed. He immediately cleared his schedule, and he's been in close contact with NASA ever since.'

Sexton certainly liked the sound of that. 'You think maybe NASA delivered some more bad news?'

'Seems a logical explanation,' she said hopefully. 'Although it would have to be pretty critical to make the President drop everything.'

Sexton considered it. Obviously, whatever was going on with NASA had to be bad news. *Otherwise the President would throw it in my face*. Sexton had been pounding the President pretty hard on NASA funding lately. The space agency's recent string of failed missions and gargantuan budget overruns had earned NASA the dubious honor of becoming Sexton's unofficial poster child against big government overspending and inefficiency. Admittedly, attacking NASA – one of the most prominent symbols of American pride – was not the way most politicians would think of winning votes, but Sexton had a weapon few other politicians had – Gabrielle Ashe. And her impeccable instincts.

The savvy young woman had come to Sexton's attention several months ago when she was working as a coordinator in Sexton's Washington campaign office. With Sexton trailing badly in the primary polls and his message of government overspending falling on deaf ears, Gabrielle Ashe wrote him a note suggesting a radical new campaign angle. She told the senator he should attack NASA's huge budget overruns and continued White House bailouts as the quintessential example of President Herney's careless overspending.

'NASA is costing Americans a fortune,' Gabrielle

Copyrighted Material

wrote, including a list of financial figures, failures, and bailouts. 'Voters have no idea. They would be horrified. I think you should make NASA a political issue.'

Sexton groaned at her naïveté. 'Yeah, and while I'm at it, I'll rail against singing the national anthem at baseball games.'

In the weeks that followed, Gabrielle continued to send information about NASA across the senator's desk. The more Sexton read, the more he realized this young Gabrielle Ashe had a point. Even by government agency standards, NASA was an astounding money pit – expensive, inefficient, and in recent years, grossly incompetent.

One afternoon Sexton was doing an on-air interview about education. The host was pressing Sexton about where he would find funding for his promised overhaul of public schools. In response, Sexton decided to test Gabrielle's NASA theory with a half-joking response. 'Money for education?' he said. 'Well, maybe I'll cut the space program in half. I figure if NASA can spend fifteen billion a year in space, I should be able to spend seven and a half billion on the kids here on earth.'

In the transmission booth, Sexton's campaign managers gasped in horror at the careless remark. After all, entire campaigns had been sunk by far less than taking a potshot at NASA. Instantly, the phone lines at the radio station lit up. Sexton's campaign managers cringed; the space patriots were circling for the kill.

Then something unexpected happened.

'Fifteen billion a year?' the first caller said, sounding shocked. 'With a *B?* Are you telling me that my son's

Copyrighted Material

math class is overcrowded because schools can't afford enough teachers, and NASA is spending fifteen billion dollars a year taking pictures of space dust?'

'Um . . . that's right,' Sexton said warily.

'Absurd! Does the President have the power to do something about that?'

'Absolutely,' Sexton replied, gaining confidence. 'A President can veto the budget request of any agency he or she deems overfunded.'

'Then you have my vote, Senator Sexton. Fifteen billion for space research, and our kids don't have teachers. It's outrageous! Good luck, sir. I hope you go all the way.'

The next caller came on the line. 'Senator, I just read that NASA's International Space Station is way overbudget and the President is thinking of giving NASA emergency funding to keep the project going. Is that true?'

Sexton jumped at this one. 'True!' He explained that the space station was originally proposed as a joint venture, with twelve countries sharing the costs. But after construction began, the station's budget spiraled wildly out of control, and many countries dropped out in disgust. Rather than scrapping the project, the President decided to cover everyone's expenses. 'Our cost for the ISS project,' Sexton announced, 'has risen from the proposed eight billion to a staggering *one hundred* billion dollars!'

The caller sounded furious. 'Why the hell doesn't the President pull the plug?'

Sexton could have kissed the guy. 'Damn good question. Unfortunately, one third of the building supplies are already in orbit, and the President spent *your* tax dollars putting them there, so pulling the plug would

Copyrighted Material

be admitting he made a multibillion-dollar blunder with *your* money.'

The calls kept coming. For the first time, it seemed Americans were waking up to the idea that NASA was an option – not a national fixture.

When the show was over, with the exception of a few NASA diehards calling in with poignant overtures about man's eternal quest for knowledge, the consensus was in: Sexton's campaign had stumbled onto the holy grail of campaigning – a new 'hot button' – a yet untapped controversial issue that struck a nerve with voters.

In the weeks that followed, Sexton trounced his opponents in five crucial primaries. He announced Gabrielle Ashe as his new personal campaign assistant, praising her for her work in bringing the NASA issue to the voters. With the wave of a hand, Sexton had made a young African-American woman a rising political star, and the issue of his racist and sexist voting record disappeared overnight.

Now, as they sat together in the limousine, Sexton knew Gabrielle had yet again proven her worth. Her new information about last week's secret meeting between the NASA administrator and the President certainly suggested more NASA troubles were brewing – perhaps another country pulling funding from the space station.

As the limousine passed the Washington Monument, Senator Sexton could not help but feel he had been anointed by destiny.

Copyrighted Material

8

Despite having ascended to the most powerful political office in the world, President Zachary Herney was average in height, with a slender build and narrow shoulders. He had a freckled face, bifocals, and thinning black hair. His unimposing physique, however, stood in stark contrast to the almost princely love the man commanded from those who knew him. It was said that if you met Zach Herney once, you would walk to the ends of the earth for him.

'So glad you could make it,' President Herney said, reaching out to shake Rachel's hand. His grasp was warm and sincere.

Rachel fought the frog in her throat. 'Of . . . course, Mr President. An honor to meet you.'

The President gave her a comforting grin, and Rachel sensed firsthand the legendary Herney affability. The man possessed an easygoing countenance political cartoonists loved because no matter how skewed a rendition they drew, no one ever mistook the man's effortless warmth and amiable smile. His eyes mirrored sincerity and dignity at all times.

'If you follow me,' he said in a cheery voice, 'I've got a cup of coffee with your name on it.'

'Thank you, sir.'

The President pressed the intercom and called for some coffee in his office.

As Rachel followed the President through the plane, she could not help but notice that he looked extremely

Copyrighted Material

happy and well rested for a man who was down in the polls. He was also very casually dressed – blue jeans, a polo shirt, and L.L. Bean hiking boots.

Rachel tried to make conversation. 'Doing . . . some hiking, Mr President?'

'Not at all. My campaign advisers have decided this should be my new look. What do you think?'

Rachel hoped for his sake that he wasn't serious. 'It's very . . . um . . . *manly*, sir.'

Herney was deadpan. 'Good. We're thinking it will help me win back some of the women's vote from your father.' After a beat, the President broke into a broad smile. 'Ms Sexton, that was a *joke*. I think we both know I'll need more than a polo shirt and blue jeans to win this election.'

The President's openness and good humor were quickly evaporating any tension Rachel felt about being there. What this President lacked in physical brawn, he more than made up for in diplomatic rapport. Diplomacy was about people skills, and Zach Herney had the gift.

Rachel followed the President toward the back of the plane. The deeper they went, the less the interior resembled a plane – curved hallways, wallpapered walls, even an exercise room complete with StairMaster and rowing machine. Oddly, the plane seemed almost entirely deserted.

'Traveling alone, Mr President?'

He shook his head. 'Just landed, actually.'

Rachel was surprised. *Landed from where?* Her intel briefs this week had included nothing about presidential travel plans. Apparently he was using Wallops Island to travel quietly.

'My staff deplaned right before you arrived,' the

Copyrighted Material

President said. 'I'm headed back to the White House shortly to meet them, but I wanted to meet you here instead of my office.'

'Trying to intimidate me?'

'On the contrary. Trying to respect you, Ms Sexton. The White House is anything but private, and news of a meeting between the two of us would put you in an awkward position with your father.'

'I appreciate that, sir.'

'It seems you're managing a delicate balancing act quite gracefully, and I see no reason to disrupt that.'

Rachel flashed on her breakfast meeting with her father and doubted that it qualified as 'graceful.' Nonetheless, Zach Herney was going out of his way to be decent, and he certainly didn't have to.

'May I call you Rachel?' Herney asked.

'Of course.' *May I call you Zach?*

'My office,' the President said, ushering her through a carved maple door.

The office aboard Air Force One certainly was cozier than its White House counterpart, but its furnishings still carried an air of austerity. The desk was mounded with papers, and behind it hung an imposing oil painting of a classic, three-masted schooner under full sail trying to outrun a raging storm. It seemed a perfect metaphor for Zach Herney's presidency at the moment.

The President offered Rachel one of the three executive chairs facing his desk. She sat. Rachel expected him to sit behind his desk, but instead he pulled one of the chairs up and sat next to her.

Equal footing, she realized. *The master of rapport*.

'Well, Rachel,' Herney said, sighing tiredly as he settled into his chair. 'I imagine you've got to be pretty

Copyrighted Material

damned confused to be sitting here right now, am I right?'

Whatever was left of Rachel's guard crumbled away with the candor in the man's voice. 'Actually, sir, I'm baffled.'

Herney laughed out loud. 'Terrific. It's not every day I can baffle someone from the NRO.'

'It's not every day someone from the NRO is invited aboard Air Force One by a President in hiking boots.'

The President laughed again.

A quiet rap on the office door announced the arrival of coffee. One of the flight crew entered with a steaming pewter pot and two pewter mugs on a tray. At the President's bidding, she laid the tray on the desk and disappeared.

'Cream and sugar?' the President asked, standing up to pour.

'Cream, please.' Rachel savored the rich aroma. *The President of the United States is personally serving me coffee?*

Zach Herney handed her a heavy pewter mug. 'Authentic Paul Revere,' he said. 'One of the little luxuries.'

Rachel sipped the coffee. It was the best she had ever tasted.

'Anyhow,' the President said, pouring himself a cup and sitting back down, 'I've got limited time here, so let's get to business.' The President plopped a sugar cube in his coffee and gazed up at her. 'I imagine Bill Pickering warned you that the only reason I would want to see you would be to use you to my political advantage?'

'Actually, sir, that's *exactly* what he said.'

The President chuckled. 'Always the cynic.'

'So he's wrong?'

Copyrighted Material

'Are you kidding?' the President laughed. 'Bill Pickering is never wrong. He's dead-on as usual.'

9

Gabrielle Ashe gazed absently out the window of Senator Sexton's limousine as it moved through the morning traffic toward Sexton's office building. She wondered how the hell she had arrived at this point in her life. Personal assistant to Senator Sedgewick Sexton. This was exactly what she had wanted, wasn't it?

I'm sitting in a limousine with the next President of the United States.

Gabrielle stared across the car's plush interior at the senator, who seemed to be far away in his own thoughts. She admired his handsome features and perfect attire. He looked presidential.

Gabrielle had first seen Sexton speak when she was a poli-sci major at Cornell University three years ago. She would never forget how his eyes probed the audience, as if sending a message directly to her – *trust me*. After Sexton's speech, Gabrielle waited in line to meet him.

'Gabrielle Ashe,' the senator said, reading her name tag. 'A lovely name for a lovely young woman.' His eyes were reassuring.

'Thank you, sir,' Gabrielle replied, feeling the man's strength as she shook his hand. 'I was really impressed by your message.'

'Glad to hear it!' Sexton thrust a business card into her hand. 'I'm always looking for bright young minds

Copyrighted Material

who share my vision. When you get out of school, track me down. My people may have a job for you.'

Gabrielle opened her mouth to thank him, but the senator was already on to the next person in line. Nonetheless, in the months that followed, Gabrielle found herself following Sexton's career on television. She watched with admiration as he spoke out against big government spending – spearheading budget cuts, streamlining the IRS to work more effectively, trimming fat at the DEA, and even abolishing redundant civil service programs. Then, when the senator's wife died suddenly in a car crash, Gabrielle watched in awe as Sexton somehow turned the negative into a positive. Sexton rose above his personal pain and declared to the world that he would be running for the presidency and dedicating the remainder of his public service to his wife's memory. Gabrielle decided right then and there that she wanted to work closely with Senator Sexton's presidential campaign.

Now she had gotten as close as anyone could get.

Gabrielle recalled the night she had spent with Sexton in his plush office, and she cringed, trying to block out the embarrassing images in her mind. *What was I thinking?* She knew she should have resisted, but somehow she'd found herself unable. Sedgewick Sexton had been an idol of hers for so long . . . and to think he wanted *her*.

The limousine hit a bump, jarring her thoughts back to the present.

'You okay?' Sexton was watching her now.

Gabrielle flashed a hurried smile. 'Fine.'

'You aren't still thinking about that drudge, are you?'

She shrugged. 'I'm still a little worried, yeah.'

Copyrighted Material

'Forget it. The drudge was the best thing that ever happened to my campaign.'

A drudge, Gabrielle had learned the hard way, was the political equivalent of leaking information that your rival used a penis enlarger or subscribed to *Stud Muffin* magazine. Drudging wasn't a glamorous tactic, but when it paid off, it paid off big.

Of course, when it backfired . . .

And backfire it had. For the White House. About a month ago, the President's campaign staff, unsettled by the slipping polls, had decided to get aggressive and leak a story they suspected to be true – that Senator Sexton had engaged in an affair with his personal assistant, Gabrielle Ashe. Unfortunately for the White House, there was no hard evidence. Senator Sexton, a firm believer in the best defense is a strong offense, seized the moment for attack. He called a national press conference to proclaim his innocence and outrage. *I cannot believe*, he said, gazing into the cameras with pain in his eyes, *that the President would dishonor my wife's memory with these malicious lies*.

Senator Sexton's performance on TV was so convincing that Gabrielle herself practically believed they had not slept together. Seeing how effortlessly he lied, Gabrielle realized that Senator Sexton was indeed a dangerous man.

Lately, although Gabrielle was certain she was backing the *strongest* horse in this presidential race, she had begun to question whether she was backing the *best* horse. Working closely with Sexton had been an eye-opening experience – akin to a behind-the-scenes tour of Universal Studios, where one's childlike awe over the movies is sullied by the realization that Hollywood isn't magic after all.

Copyrighted Material

Although Gabrielle's faith in Sexton's message remained intact, she was beginning to question the messenger.

10

'What I am about to tell you, Rachel,' the President said, 'is classified ''UMBRA.'' Well beyond your current security clearance.'

Rachel felt the walls of Air Force One closing in around her. The President had flown her to Wallops Island, invited her onboard his plane, poured her coffee, told her flat out that he intended to use her to political advantage against her own father, and now he was announcing he intended to give her classified information illegally. However affable Zach Herney appeared on the surface, Rachel Sexton had just learned something important about him. This man took control in a hurry.

'Two weeks ago,' the President said, locking eyes with her, 'NASA made a discovery.'

The words hung a moment in the air before Rachel could process them. *A NASA discovery?* Recent intelligence updates had suggested nothing out of the ordinary going on with the space agency. Of course, these days a 'NASA discovery' usually meant realizing they'd grossly underbudgeted some new project.

'Before we talk further,' the President said, 'I'd like to know if you share your father's cynicism over space exploration.'

Rachel resented the comment. 'I certainly hope you

Copyrighted Material

didn't call me here to ask me to control my father's rants against NASA.'

He laughed. 'Hell, no. I've been around the Senate long enough to know that *nobody* controls Sedgewick Sexton.'

'My father is an opportunist, sir. Most successful politicians are. And unfortunately NASA has made itself an opportunity.' The recent string of NASA errors had been so unbearable that one either had to laugh or cry – satellites that disintegrated in orbit, space probes that never called home, the International Space Station budget rising tenfold and member countries bailing out like rats from a sinking ship. Billions were being lost, and Senator Sexton was riding it like a wave – a wave that seemed destined to carry him to the shores of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

'I will admit,' the President continued, 'NASA has been a walking disaster area lately. Every time I turn around, they give me yet another reason to slash their funding.'

Rachel saw her opening for a foothold and took it. 'And yet, sir, didn't I just read that you bailed them out last week with another three million in emergency funding to keep them solvent?'

The President chuckled. 'Your father was pleased with that one, wasn't he?'

'Nothing like sending ammunition to your executioner.'

'Did you hear him on *Nightline*? ''Zach Herney is a space addict, and the taxpayers are funding his habit.'' '

'But you keep proving him right, sir.'

Herney nodded. 'I make it no secret that I'm an enormous fan of NASA. I always have been. I was a child of the space race – Sputnik, John Glenn, Apollo 11

Copyrighted Material