

Chapter 1

Every United States senator looks in the mirror and sees a future president. Raybelle McKeehan had been seeing that future president since she was ten years old.

Not that hers was the best mirror for looking into. The bedroom light didn't flatter her, but there was no one around to see. People probably thought senators had security around them all the time, but usually they didn't. When she ran for president, of course, that would change.

She sat on the edge of the four-poster bed and pulled on her pantyhose. Raybelle hated pantyhose. Hated the whole business of it: the endless losing battle to keep her legs shaved smooth, as pointless as most committee meetings; the constant runs from always being in a hurry; the unnatural flesh tones or the equally unappealing choice of opaque black, which she avoided because she didn't want folks thinking she was hiding her legs, that she didn't shave them at all.

Politics was all an act, and she was no actress. She was what once would have been called a lady of a certain age--old enough to be a senator, which was all that mattered. Five feet nine inches tall without high heels, which she also disliked, but wore when she had to. Blonde hair, kept stylish (not to mention blonde) by a nice young woman who did not charge four hundred dollars, so no scandal. Raybelle wore a lot of black and blue, to match what her opponents looked like once she'd given them a pounding. She avoided wearing earth tones, like the colors of the room, and she reserved red for occasions, like today, when she had to make a power impression on someone she didn't yet know.

There had been a major shakeup in Washington. The Republican president, his popularity at an ebb, was facing a Congress that for the first time was made up primarily of the opposition party. One of the groups of voters he, and by extension Republicans like Raybelle, had pissed off in the election was veterans, and a bipartisan committee had been formed in the Senate to

investigate how the government had failed them. And one of the dominoes falling in this year's scheme of things was that Raybelle McKeehan of Tennessee was on that committee.

She didn't have to impress her longtime Democratic colleague from Tennessee, Grant Rivers. The Secretary of Defense, on the other hand, didn't yet know Raybelle. But he must never forget her after today. She would wear red. And heels.

Just as she was applying the last touch of red lipstick, squinting into the grimy mirror (Lord, what would Mama say?), the phone assaulted her senses. "Yes, Patricia?"

"Senator, this is Melody."

"Who?" came out of her mouth, too fast for manners. "Where's Patricia?"

"Ma'am, this is Melody Park. The new assistant to the assistant—"

"All right. What is it?" Of course. Everything in Washington was new. Why not a new assistant? Never mind that she didn't remember meeting this Melody.

"It's your brother, Senator."

"I'm not speaking to my brother," Raybelle said, and she meant that, in every possible sense.

"No—he's not on the line," Melody said. "Someone called about him. Tomas Jefferson."

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, ma'am. That's the doctor's name, Tomas Jefferson."

"All right. You have the number? I'll be in the office in a little while, Melody."

"Yes—"

"I'll call him from there." Raybelle clicked the phone off, sorry only for an instant that she had adopted the habit of hanging up without ever saying goodbye. It wasted time, seconds of every phone call. And she was on a lot of phone calls.

On the ride to Capitol Hill she focused on her paperwork, allowing the mounds of memos to crowd other thoughts from her mind. She had gotten on this committee by being nice and shaking lots of hands. Where she came from, a handshake meant a deal. She'd shaken hands all

the way to the Tennessee General Assembly and then the Congress, at a time when Tennessee was represented by two Democratic senators, one of them Albert Gore, Jr.

Everyone in Washington knew she lived for the winning resolution, whether passing one or just resolving a particular problem. She refused to be caught up in any affairs, legal or otherwise. She could talk farm, nuclear plant, bridge-building or ditch-digging, and she didn't privilege people because of who they were.

Certainly not her brother Dennis, whom she hadn't seen in years. Dennis's name was not going on her to-do list, today or any other day.

She powered into the office and past its warren of desks all hopping with activity, productive or otherwise. Raybelle trailed "Morning"s after her and the staffers caught them like candies from a G. I. truck. "Where's Melody Park?"

A petite young Korean-American woman said "Good morning, Senator" and handed her a cup of coffee. Freshly brewed.

"Bless you, Melody." She raised a cup to the newest member of staff, continued to her computer and leaned over the desk. Sitting wasted time. She heard Melody behind her: "Senator, the agenda for today is—"

"The Secretary. I got it." If it weren't for that meeting, Raybelle would have eaten breakfast—the most important meal of the day—but she couldn't risk slopping anything all over the red dress.

"I was going to say that I've e-mailed your agenda to you, and I'll have it automatically sent to your PDA, if you'll give me the number please."

Raybelle frowned between clicks on the mouse. "I have never been caught in a public display of affection, and you needn't concern yourself that I shall."

She took Melody's pause for confusion. "No, ma'am. I meant your personal digital assistant. Your Palm or BlackBerry or—"

"I've hired you. You seem competent. You walk and talk, so why would I want some

vibrating appliance that doesn't do either one?"

"Yes, Senator." Melody cleared her throat. "I know you have a busy day with the committee meeting, but—"

"We."

"I'm sorry?"

"We have a busy day." Raybelle turned from her computer with the special sigh of frustration she reserved for it alone. "Listen, Melody, I know you didn't get this job because you like making coffee or explaining abbreviations to dinosaurs. You're here because you want my job someday. Right?"

"I'm just a law—"

"But you're here. You're here, and so from now on I'm going to assume that wherever I am, that's where you want to be. I'm in a committee meeting, you're in the committee meeting. I'm stuck in traffic, so are you. If I have to go to the ladies' room, I expect you to be right outside waiting for me. I want you sticking like a burr to my backside. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Raybelle might have imagined it but she thought Melody had snapped to attention.

"No need for 'ma'am,' either. You're a grown woman too."

"Yes, Senator."

"So." Raybelle held her coffee over the desk, so that when it spilled, it would not be on herself. "We're leaving in five minutes. Tell me about my brother."

"A Doctor Tomas Jefferson called and said it was a medical emergency," Melody said, her posture more relaxed. "That's all she would say."

"She?"

"It did sound like a woman, despite the name."

"Where is this Doctor Jefferson?" Raybelle grabbed a dull pencil and a trusty wad of paper. Personal digital assistant, indeed.

“Chicago.”

What kind of mess had Dennis gotten himself into this time? “Tell you what. While we’re walking to the chamber, I want you to help me figure out how to make a long-distance call on this thing.” Raybelle pitched her cell phone to Melody and moved towards the door. “I can’t waste any time figuring out stuff you already know.”

“Thank you, Senator,” Melody said, running to catch up.

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Beads of sweat dripped into Dr. Tomas Jefferson’s eyes and she swiped at them with the back of her hand. Thinking of Alicia made them feel like tears, though Tomas couldn’t remember the last time she had cried. Not when Alicia left, or since. *Don’t count months; count reps.* She pressed her spine more firmly against the weight bench and lifted the barbell on a long exhalation.

It would almost have been better if Alicia had left her for another woman. Or hell, a man. Anything would have been better than the day she’d announced that Tomas just didn’t make her happy anymore, didn’t “satisfy” her. Tomas had acted wronged and uncomprehending, not that she didn’t have every right to be, since she was the one being left. But now that it was too late to do anything about it, she could finally admit to herself that she had known.

A doctor treats symptoms, but she was supposed to diagnose as well, to rule out one possibility and then another until she got to the underlying cause. That’s what she should have done with Alicia—looked beneath the symptoms of her lover’s discontent to find out what was really wrong, and address them. Instead, Tomas had thought not like a doctor but like an accountant, totting up pluses and minuses and concluding that, on balance, they were happy.

This train of thought was going to wreck her if she wasn’t careful. She sighed, pretending it was an *ujjay* breath like in yoga, wiped her moist hands on her black workout pants and adjusted the T-shirt from her scuba diving trip to the Red Sea. It said SHARM EL-SHEIKH—SHUT UP AND DIVE. In a Chicago March, it comforted Tomas to be reminded of the warm

sea.

The one thing Tomas wished she could change about the way she looked was her hair. She longed to do something with it, braids or dreads, but even her black patients seemed not to want that in a doctor. In other respects, she was conservative in appearance. She always changed into street clothes before she left the clinic or the hospital, and could never understand how her colleagues could run around the streets of Chicago in their scrubs, smoking of all things. Not that she didn't have her own compulsions, but at least hers were healthy, and working out at the gym every day relieved stress.

Her cell phone rang and the woman on the next bench made a disgusted sound. "Wish people wouldn't bring their phones in here. What are you, a doctor?"

"Yes." Tomas returned the barbell to its rack with a grunt. She grabbed the phone from where it rested on her towel. "Doctor Jefferson." The "Doctor" felt like a waste of breath—one word more than necessary.

"How do I know if it's ringing?" someone on the phone said, not to her.

Tomas looked at the number, but it told her nothing about the source of the mysterious Southern voice. "I'm sorry, who's calling please?" Three words more than necessary.

"This is Senator McKeehan. I have a message to call Thomas Jefferson in Chicago."

Tomas laughed. Wasn't the first time somebody had made that joke. "Senator, it's Tomas Jefferson," she said, stressing the *-as*.

"I don't know you, Doctor Jefferson, and you don't know me. Get to the point. Please."

That one word, *please*, must have been costly for McKeehan, who otherwise sounded like a total bitch. "It's about your brother."

"What about him?"

"I don't know how much you know about Dennis's situation—"

"More than I want to."

"Look, Senator. I don't like to waste words either. Mr. McKeehan is living on the streets,

and his condition is deteriorating.”

“You know I haven’t seen Dennis in years.” McKeehan said it as a statement of fact, not something she gave a damn about.

“Yes. But what we need here is a—”

“Listen, Doctor, I’m on my way into a very important meeting. Do me a favor, will you, and call my assistant, Patricia. She’ll sort out anything you need from me. Melody’s number is—”

“I thought you said Patricia?”

McKeehan rattled off a number and said, “Thanks,” and hung up without saying goodbye. Tomas hated it when people did that. It wasn’t good procedure, to click away without confirming the exchange was over.

The gym wasn’t warm, and Tomas had been sweating. Sitting still for several minutes had left her chilled, and her body ached from weariness as much as the strain of her workout. She decided to quit for the day and, after less stretching than she’d recommend to a patient, headed for the shower.

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Raybelle started to toss the phone to Melody, just to get rid of it, but put it in her understated black leather handbag instead. “Thanks. Sorry about calling you Patricia again.”

“That’s all right. Congresswoman.”

She grinned at the sparkle she saw in Melody’s eyes. “Point taken. We’re going to get to know one another quite well, and I meant to get off to a better start.”

“Is your brother all right?”

Raybelle was surprised, and slowed for a moment. Melody didn’t look at her again; she was busy trying to match her boss’s much longer stride. “My brother suffers from delusions, but he won’t let anybody help him. He and I have nothing to say to each other. So we don’t.”

“What kind of delusions?”

Instead of answering, Raybelle pointed to the door of the senate chamber. “Tell you later.

It's show time."

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The droning of her fellow committee members had been going on so long that Raybelle felt the need to poke herself with a pin. The arcanities of Senate procedure required old business to be taken care of first. Old businessmen was more like it. Raybelle was sure she could smell their aftershave and less pleasant odors as the room baked hotter and hotter under the camera lights. She felt herself beginning to perspire under her blazer. The red power dress would be going straight back to the dry cleaners.

At moments like this one, Raybelle would raise her eyes slowly to the ceiling, to remind herself of the chamber's grandeur and the reason she was there. Robert Byrd, grand old man of the Senate, said it was the highest trust in the land, the office of senator. Unlike many of her colleagues, Raybelle took seriously her responsibility to be there for daily votes, not just "important" issues, the ones that made the news. The light broke through the window panels of the dome and gave her hope that the country could, indeed, get "through the night with a light from above."

At last, the Secretary of Defense was announced.

Henry Perry was shorter than he looked on television (weren't they all?). Shorter than she was. He was bald in almost a defiant way, as if he'd scrubbed his head clean of any hint that hair had ever grown there. She couldn't tell the color of his eyes behind square glasses, yet he seemed to look right at her. Red dress. Bull's-eye.

"Mr. Chair?" Perry said, and that always made Raybelle think the person was addressing a cartoon character.

"You have the floor, Mr. Secretary."

Perry began his peroration, thus: "The United States armed forces, as you know, are the finest in the world. Our military has never been stronger." He then immediately stated that it needed to be stronger still, and that, were not his plans put in place for the "tightening and

streamlining” of the U. S. military, it would be in dire shape indeed.

From across the aisle, Senator Grant Rivers shot her a look that said *Ain't that the total contradiction?*

She was tempted to guffaw. It often felt like she and Grant were kids in school together, rolling their eyes at whatever the teacher said. They shared the same beliefs in personal liberty and the same irreverence for the executive branch they each, of course, hoped to head one day. No doubt Grant would get to the White House before Raybelle did, but that didn't bother her too much. He could help her in the meantime.

“What we must understand,” Perry was saying, “is that the realities of the new conflict have swept away old timelines, old ways of keeping the peace. In the time it takes for this august body to make a declaration of war, this city could be vaporized. Our armed forces must be sleek, swift, ready to pounce on the enemy and destroy him wherever he may be. Our brave men and women in uniform—” He said this looking at Raybelle and Olympia Snowe of Maine, as though reminded that women did exist— “cannot wait for the leadership in Washington to tell them what to do. In the time it would take, Washington, D. C. could be wiped from the face of the earth.”

“Secretary Perry?” Grant raised his ample frame in his chair with the same leisure as he voiced his question.

“Yes, Senator.”

“You've come here to advise us of your plans for the new, improved military, and that's good. But something about this concerns me. It appears you've mistaken whose role it is to advise, here. I believe the way the Constitution puts it, Congress is supposed to advise you.”

Perry raised his hands in a deferential and, Raybelle thought, rather fey gesture. “Well, not me, Senator Rivers. The president. Or, as it's more appropriate to call him in this context, the commander-in-chief.”

“Right, right.” Grant's face took on an expression that Raybelle was coming to recognize

as predatory. “That’s another statement you made that’s bothering me a little bit. You said something about—help me out here—not waiting for the leadership in Washington to tell the military what to do?” Perry nodded. “So what you’re saying is that the commander-in-chief, our president, is not in charge of the military? That his commanders in the field should tell him what to do?”

“The president is in complete control—”

“Now hear me out, Mr. Secretary, hear me out. I just don’t much care for the sound of this. Our men and women in uniform do not choose their mission. We send them.”

“But the president, as you know, Senator, is a decorated veteran and knows what the generals in the field have to do.”

“Before they do, I’m sure.” Grant’s tone was dry. “You don’t have to defend the president’s valor; this isn’t an election campaign. But if we start letting the military direct the civilian leadership, then we might as well be Turkey.”

“Turkey is a great ally of—”

“I yield to my esteemed colleague from the state of Tennessee.”

When Grant leaned back, Raybelle was sure she caught a wink meant for her. They were allies; they both loved Congress more than they loved their own parties. She addressed Perry, and felt the red dress as smooth on her as the timbre of her voice. Perry wouldn’t even know she was insulting him.

“You know the Constitution well.”

“I’m sure I do.”

“I’m sure you do too.” It was all Raybelle could do not to buff her nails. “And you know that the oath of office of the chief executive, whom you serve, is ‘to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States.’”

Perry smiled, not in a nice way. “The presidential oath becomes you, Senator McKeehan.”

“Then you further know,” she said, “that ‘this august body’ is responsible for whatever authority the president has to wage war. You come to Congress to ask, Secretary Perry. Not to tell.”

She paused for an instant, and in that instant Raybelle and Perry locked eyes. A draw, then. She’d take it.

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“Oh, you did great in there, Senator!” Melody was walking faster and talking with more enthusiasm than she had that morning. Truth was, in the course of the exchange with Perry Raybelle had forgotten that Melody—or anyone else—was there. Their confrontation had been as intimate as if they were the only ones in the senate chamber.

“Thanks.” She could use the tuning-out process now, as the bustle around her seemed to be unceasing.

“He’s right, you know,” Melody went on. “You sounded like a president.”

“Every senator wants to be president.”

When they reached the office, Melody said, “Do you need something for lunch?”

Raybelle looked at her. “Lunch? Oh, I don’t keep a regular lunch hour.” Before Melody could reply, she said, “But you go right ahead and eat. Just—if you don’t mind staying nearby, for today. I have some papers you can help me with this afternoon.”

“I’ve got my lunch right here.” Melody pulled a paper bag from a tiny refrigerator near her desk that Raybelle had forgotten was there.

A few minutes later she was ready to cuss the computer when she smelled a strong and unfamiliar aroma coming from Melody’s work area. “Lord, what are you eating?”

“Kimchi,” Melody said, a forkful of it halfway to her mouth.

“And what might that be?”

“Fermented cabbage.” Melody’s shrug was meant to seem apologetic, but wasn’t at all; Raybelle knew that shrug from her colleagues. “It’s Korean.”

Raybelle figured a day would come when she'd be eating popcorn or some odoriferous takeout and nobody would dare complain then.

“So, Senator. That Doctor Jefferson called again about your brother. Thought I'd draw up the paperwork she needs this afternoon and you could sign it.”

That was just what Raybelle had planned to have her do. Was it possible that she was “proactive,” as all job applicants claimed to be these days? “You can tell her, if she calls again, that you'll fax it to her later today.”

“Oh, I already did.”

That was two ways in as many minutes that Melody had impressed Raybelle with her Washington insouciance. “Did you really just graduate from college?”

“Mmmhmm. Just moved here.”

“And you're from Chicago.”

“No, Naperville. Third largest city in Illinois. Were you going to tell me what kind of delusions your brother has?”

And persistent as hell. That's three. Raybelle looked at the ballsy assistant, who had finished her kimchi and was waiting for all the world as if she were owed an answer.

“My brother thinks he's Jesus.”