

Prologue

Alexandria, Virginia Christmas Eve

Somewhere, hidden among the half-empty box of Krispy Kreme donuts, the ashtray cluttered with two dozen Camel Light butts, and stack upon stack of computer printout sheets, he found it.

“Got it right here,” Robert Rodano said casually into the phone as he brought the paper up to his face, deeply relieved he had been able to lay his hand on it. He hadn’t expected this call and now was locked inside his home office in rapid recovery mode. Nine o’clock on Christmas Eve. Wasn’t this time supposed to be spent beside the tree with carols and the kids and all that Norman Rockwell nonsense?

But his caller wasn’t in a Norman Rockwell state of mind. When the Chairman was on the phone, you took the call. Even on Christmas Eve.

“These numbers are so fresh you can squeeze juice out of them.”

“Well?” the Chairman huffed without a trace of patience.

“Exactly as we expected.” Rodano cradled the receiver against one shoulder as he reached for a cigarette and a lighter. “Governor Morgan is running away with it. The only question is how the rest of the pack will place.”

A grunt came as Rodano lit up. He took it as a sign he should continue. “It’s a three-way scramble for second, with everybody else so far behind they barely show up. Jack the Ripper could get better numbers than some of these guys.”

“I don’t like surprises, Bob. If Morgan stumbles out of the starting gate, the media will pounce on him as ‘vulnerable.’ Then the story becomes ‘Can he really win?’ and the jackals will pick his carcass clean by Valentine’s Day. That can’t happen.”

“And it won’t,” Rodano said from one side of his mouth, the cigarette clenched in the other. “I’ve been polling since Bush ran against Gore, and this is the tightest lock I’ve ever seen. You can bet the farm on it.” He waited for a laugh that didn’t come before adding a bit too pointedly, “It’s Iowa, you know.”

“I know it’s Iowa, Bob. And I know how quirky Iowa Republicans are. We’re talking about picking the party’s presidential nominee. I hate starting off with Farmer Bob and his corn-fed wife showing up at their local caucus, just to screw us over with a curveball we didn’t see coming.”

Rodano exhaled quickly. “And that’s not going to happen. Des Moines and the Quad Cities, the college crowd in Ames, even Farmer Bob and Mrs. Bob ... I’m telling you, sir, Morgan is scoring across the board. In three weeks, he’ll come out of Iowa roaring like a lion.”

“The others?”

“They’ll be fighting to carry Morgan’s luggage. They’re already jockeying to become the running mate. Kruger is saying he can keep the Midwest in the Republican fold if he’s on the ticket. Sanchez says he’ll deliver the Hispanics. Bradford and McRiley will get up on their hind

legs and beg for it, but secretly they'll be happy for a consolation spot in the Cabinet. Even Reverend Leon Brooks is acting like he wants to be the veep."

"And Granby?" the Chairman asked. "What about him?"

Rodano choked out a laugh, big puffs of smoke escaping his mouth with the guffaw.

"Granby? He'll gather his shattered pride and trudge off to New Hampshire. The day after he loses there, it'll be back to the Senate where he'll count the millions in his blind trust and mark off the months until he can retire and hang out on some sunny beach where rich, white ex-senators spend their days waiting to die."

"You'd better be right. I've put the whole organization behind Morgan."

"And you've got a winner."

"I got where I am by stopping surprises before they happen. I don't want any surprises in Iowa, Bob."

"Don't give it a second thought, sir. Just relax and enjoy the holidays with your family."

There was a pause so long you could almost grow vegetables, followed by a roaring laugh. "Relax? That's funny, Bob." A click, and the line went dead.

Rodano reached down and hit a preprogrammed number on the console, triggering eleven high-pitched "bleeps" as a phone number was automatically dialed.

"Steve, it's me." He took a deep drag from his cigarette and shot the smoke out his nostrils. "Yeah, I know it's freakin' Christmas Eve. Guess who just called me ... and it wasn't Santa Claus." He waited. "The Chairman." He waited again. "That's right. He wants to make sure our Iowa numbers are right and Morgan's gonna win big."

Rodano picked up a pen and nervously doodled the outline of a Christmas tree. "Of course I told him the numbers are solid. But if by some fluke it turns out we're wrong about this ..."

He listened for a moment. "Calm down, Steve," he eventually said in a soothing voice. "Drink some eggnog. Then get on the phone to the boys in Des Moines. I want a fresh round of polling the morning of the twenty-sixth. If Morgan's numbers dip by even a microscopic fraction, we need to be on top of it. If we somehow blow this one, we might as well put on our blue vests and start saying, 'Welcome to Walmart.' Because our days working in politics will be over."

He nodded his head in unseen agreement. "I know. I know, Steve. Just humor me, okay? Now go give your gifts to Cathy and the kids. Merry Christmas to you, too."

He hung up the phone and looked at the small artificial tree his wife had insisted on placing in the corner of his office. She lived in annual fear that some part of their home might make it through December without being decorated for the holidays.

"Well, Santa," he said aloud as he stubbed out his cigarette and stood up, "I've been a good boy this year. Please let Bob Morgan win the Republican presidential nomination like everyone tells us he will."

Chapter 1

Creston, Iowa

Early January

The last normal day of his life began like any other Thursday. No blinding shaft of light flooded down from heaven, no ominous sign pointed to momentous events about to unfold. There was only a clock radio from Sears that roared to life at six forty-five, shaking him awake by blaring an old Randy Travis song playing on an AM radio station.

Glenn Tupper swore as his eyes stayed closed. He had hit the snooze button twice already. He couldn't delay getting up any longer. His feet flopped onto the cold hardwood floor, and for the hundredth time he regretted not carpeting it like his wife had asked him a hundred times to do.

Twenty chilly minutes later, he was showered, shaved, dressed, and following the sizzle of bacon coming from the kitchen. Debbie was standing over a gas stove, flipping the strips with a brown plastic spatula.

He leaned over to kiss her, but she turned away so fast his lips only brushed her cheek. *She isn't over it yet*, he thought as he poured coffee into a tall thermos.

"Amber's got that music thing at school this afternoon," she said without looking at him.

"I remember." Glenn screwed the lid onto the thermos and let a chatty morning news host sitting in a TV studio in New York fill the space between them with tips for planning a spring garden. He watched the woman, good-looking and blonde with the help of a bottle, and then glanced over at his wife's back. Even in her flannel bathrobe as bright red as Santa's suit, her morning hair sticking in every direction like a compass gone mad, and lost in a sullen anger she clung to like the sole possession pulled from a burning building, he loved her.

"Bennett's got basketball practice tonight, too. You promised you'd pick up the boys this time," came from the far side of her shoulder.

He walked over, put his left hand on her arm, and grabbed a piece of bacon off a plate with his right.

"That's for the kids."

"It's Daddy's now," he said between crunches. He tried to snuggle against her neck.

"Amber! Bennett! Time for breakfast!" she called.

Glenn sighed in surrender. He put on his plaid coat and picked up the thermos. "See you tonight, I guess."

At last his wife faced him. He tried to find some hint in her eyes, some slight suggestion that the thaw had started. "You need a new coat," she said, returning her attention to the bacon.

Glenn wiggled his fingers into thick leather gloves. "This one's still got one more winter in it."

"That's what you said last winter. And the winter before that." As the back door closed, he thought he heard one last "and the winter before that."

Dry snow crunched beneath his boots. When he reached his silver Ford F-150 pickup truck, he took a small broom from the passenger side of the floor and brushed the fresh snowfall off the windshield. Once inside, he had to turn the key several times to get the engine started. He needed to replace more than his coat, he thought as he backed into Chestnut Street.

The big truck moved slowly, carefully avoiding patches of ice hidden beneath the latest dusting of snow. The sun was edging above rooftops now. He saw another pair of tire tracks. He was usually among the first people to break the freshly fallen snow each morning.

It felt good, inching along in no particular hurry, seeing the yellow glow of kitchen lights as dozens of families prepared for the day just as he had done. For a handful of minutes each morning, he and Creston shared a special relationship, a hidden moment when he watched the little town shake off its slumber and come to life.

Within minutes, he turned onto Adams Street and passed an old two-story train depot with a tall, red tile roof that now served double duty as Creston City Hall. This was downtown; blocks of brick buildings that had stood here since Woodrow Wilson was president.

The truck bumped as he rolled over the railroad tracks. Now he was on Highway 34, “the highway,” townsfolk called it, where the cookie-cutter commercial bacterial growth that was the backbone of suburban America had finally reached his little town. If it was franchised, had lots of lights, and needed a big parking lot, it was located here.

Two minutes more and a teenage hand passed him a cup of hot coffee from a drive-through window. He sipped deeply, gratefully, and thought it ironic that McDonald’s had the best coffee in town. The thermos filled with Debbie’s coffee was always saved for later in the day. The young hand passed an Egg McMuffin through the window, and soon the truck was moving again. He retraced his path back to downtown, then a few blocks east to Mills Street, pulling up in front of a brick building with a sign saying “Sunshine Small Engine Repair” over the door.

He switched off the ignition and stepped down into the snow. He didn’t bother locking the truck door. In Creston, you only locked a car or truck door when you were leaving town for the weekend.

With the thermos under one arm, the cup of coffee in one hand, and the half-eaten sandwich in his mouth, he pulled open the front door. The smell of propane gas from a space heater mingled with gasoline and oil from a dozen engines opened and scattered around the room. A tall, thin form dressed in brown coveralls was already bent over one of them at a workbench in the corner.

“Morning, Bobby,” he said as he set the thermos and paper cup on the top of a cluttered gray metal government surplus desk.

Bobby gave a wave with his free hand as the other fumbled inside a motor for a screw. Already the white stick of the day’s first Tootsie Pop was poking out from his mouth. Glenn knew Bobby’s pockets were full of them. By five that afternoon, Bobby would have gone through at least ten, maybe twelve. Cherry was his favorite flavor, but he wasn’t picky. The fact that his teeth weren’t riddled with cavities was nothing short of a dental miracle.

Glenn made himself comfortable in a chair with a cracked green vinyl seat ripped down the middle like the San Andreas Fault and opened the morning edition of the *Creston News Advertiser*. The smart people read the bigger paper from nearby Osceola or the state’s leading paper from Des Moines. They may offer more depth, but they wouldn’t have anything about the

teenager who downed eight cans of beer and plowed into a grain elevator out on the highway last weekend, and they surely wouldn't tell you which friend's baby had just arrived or whose child had made that quarter's honor roll at the middle school. That was real news in Creston.

But the pile of invoices that was rapidly growing on one desk corner could only be put off so long, and Glenn finally pushed the paper aside and got down to work.

At midmorning, the phone rang with the day's first bit of new business.

"I've got to run over to Red Oak," Glenn called to Bobby as he shoved his arms into his coat. "Old Man Beck's corn feeder is conked out again. He'll pay me extra to come over and fix it. Keep an eye on things till I get back."

The white stick in Bobby's mouth bobbed up and down as he nodded his head.

Glenn grabbed his keys, picked up the thermos of coffee, and headed back to his truck, unaware of what was waiting down the road.

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Just west of Creston, the countryside couldn't make up its mind whether to be flat or hilly. So it did both. Rolling hills pressed against one another the way a sheet bunches up on an unmade bed in the morning. Then the land flattened out for a mile or two until the next batch of small hills.

There was little traffic but plenty of biting wind along the open stretch of Highway 34. Thin fingers of snow blew down the empty asphalt. A young man huddled inside his charcoal Brooks Brothers overcoat, rapidly rubbing his hands together.

"Fifty states to pick from, and the nomination process has to start here?" he asked, casting a forlorn look at a Holstein cow staring back at him from across a barbed wire fence.

"Iowa is as good a place as any," an older man answered in the tone parents use on impatient children.

His young companion missed the rebuke. He pulled a cell phone from his pocket and jabbed numbers with a gloved index finger. He waited a minute and said, "Where the hell is the 'Can you hear me now?' guy when you really need him? The bastard."

The cold was turning the older man's nose red, but it seemed to go well with his stately good looks. He had a dignified expression, and even with the wind racing around his white hair, it somehow managed to stay perfectly in place. It was as if an old Hollywood studio's casting office had picked him to play a United States senator.

That was partly because J. Phillip Granby happened to be the junior senator from Pennsylvania. He was among the herd of candidates seeking the Republican presidential nomination, and just now he had two very big problems. First, he was lagging so low in the polls that few Republicans seemed to be aware of his candidacy. But more immediately, and perhaps more importantly, his rented Ford Taurus sedan was broken down on the side of the road.

"Triple A will send someone sooner or later," he reminded his young campaign staffer. More than an hour earlier, a passerby had promised to call roadside assistance for them, just as soon as he reached an area where his cell phone worked. It was the last vehicle they had seen.

"If we don't freeze to death first," the kid huffed, offended by having to wait. He was what is known in political circles as the "body man." His duties sent him everywhere the candidate went

and kept him ever at the candidate's side. Part traveling administrative assistant, part valet, part go-fer, part confidant, if any need arose for the candidate, personal or professional, the body man was expected to set things right. Fast.

Granby had seen the type too many times to count. Bright, self-important twentysomethings a year or two out of college or grad school. Eager to change the world, they were just as eager to hitch their wagons to an ascending star that could carry them to the White House. Some of them had family trust funds to bankroll their career as a full-time political operative. Most didn't. They relied on credit cards until November, when victory propelled them into their personal rendezvous with destiny—or defeat landed them in bankruptcy court. They tended to be painfully intelligent and unbearably arrogant. They were clothed in the cocky self-assurance of youth and enjoyed that brief period when everything they thought, said, felt, or did was absolutely right, happily unaware that middle age was waiting around the bend with a few lessons of its own.

Granby was stuck with one of them now on the side of a freezing road bordered by snow-covered pastures in southwestern Iowa with a car that wouldn't start, a wrecker that supposedly had been on the way for more than an hour, and an evening speaking engagement in Ottumwa a hundred miles away.

"We'll never make it," the young man fretted.

"You worry too much," Granby said as he reached in his coat and fished out a package of Marlboros.

The young man frowned. "You're not going to light up *here*, are you?"

Granby looked at the cow. "Think I'll lose her vote?"

"What if a reporter catches you smoking? Or worse, a photographer?"

"I've got news for you. We're about as close to the middle of nowhere as you can get. There are no photographers here. There are no tow trucks or wreckers here. There's just you and me, a bored cow, and a very icy wind."

A silver pickup truck suddenly appeared in the distance.

"And him!" the young aide shouted excitedly. He stepped to the side of the road and waved both arms above his head.

Granby tucked the cigarettes back inside his coat and waited.

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Glenn slowed the truck to halt. He leaned across the seat and rolled down the passenger window.

"Having trouble?"

"We sure are," the young man said with the exaggerated friendliness of someone eager for a quick way out of a jam. "Hi, I'm Joel Bergmann."

Glenn looked at the hand thrust into the open window and shook it. "Glenn Tupper."

"This is ..." The older man stepped up to the window, cutting off Bergmann. He bent down and smiled. "Phil Granby."

"Looks like you guys need a lift. Where are you heading?"

“Ottumwa,” Granby said. “I know it’s a long way off, but we’re meeting a friend in Osceola who can take us the rest of the way.”

“I’m going the other direction,” Glenn explained. The young man’s face fell. Then Glenn remembered a time he had been stuck on an empty winter road, and he shivered as he recalled the hours he had spent waiting until a farmer finally came along. On a day like today, there was no telling when the next driver would appear. He gave a little shrug. “What the heck; a run over to Osceola won’t hurt me. Hop in.”

“We can’t thank you enough.” Bergmann was nonstop gratitude as he retrieved a briefcase from the Taurus.

Granby slid into the seat beside him.

Glenn felt his face redden. “I wasn’t expecting company,” he said as he bent down and picked up discarded fast food wrappers from the floorboard.

“This is nothing. You ought to see my desk at work.”

They laughed. There was a likeable quality about this man, Glenn noticed, a relaxed, natural way that put you at ease.

Bergmann climbed in and slammed the door shut. Glenn made a U-turn, and they headed east.

“So ...” Glenn began, turning to an always-safe conversation starter, “where are you guys from?”

Bergmann looked surprised.

“Washington,” Granby interjected. “But don’t hold that against us. We’re actually decent people.”

Glenn grinned. “You’re not from the IRS, are you?” Then he froze. Suddenly, the idea didn’t seem quite so outlandish. They were wearing suits and had a briefcase after all.

“Hardly,” Granby said with a chuckle.

Bergmann seemed like he was suffering an indignity and had had enough of it. “Don’t you watch the news? Surely you recognize Sen ...”

Granby’s hand clamped on Bergmann’s knee and squeezed hard. “Insurance,” Granby said. “We work in the insurance industry.”

Bergmann slumped against the window and rubbed his knee in defeat.

“You like it?”

“Not always. But I like helping people,” Granby answered. “How about you?”

“I own a small engine repair shop in Creston. Lawnmowers, snowblowers, boats, farm machinery. If it’s got an engine and it breaks, I can fix it.”

“You should have looked at our car,” Bergmann said sullenly.

“Naw, I don’t do cars. Just small engines.”

“Good honest work,” Granby said as he studied the passing countryside. He seemed interested in the farmhouses and barns, the cattle and giant round hay bales in a way his companion clearly wasn’t. “Lived here long, Glenn?”

“All my life. My dad, granddad, great-granddad, too. Tupper have been here forever.”

Granby nodded. “I know the feeling. My family beat William Penn to Pennsylvania.”

Warm heat blew in through the vents as the truck moved slowly to avoid a spill into the ditch. Conversation came easily in the pickup’s cab. The two men talked about their families,

their pets, their shared love of basketball. They talked about gas prices and corn prices and where they hoped to go for vacation that summer. Glenn described the biggest fish he had ever caught, and Granby recounted the trouble he was having with his backswing in golf.

By the time the truck was nearing the outskirts of Osceola, it seemed the two had been friends for years.

A garish billboard came into view. *Bob Morgan*, it proclaimed in bold letters between thick red and white stripes and a cluster of stars off to one side. *The president we need.*

Tupper sighed. "It's that time of year again."

"Politics," Granby sighed in sympathy. "You just can't escape it."

"Not in Iowa in January. Politicians are thicker than fleas on a dog's back. You never know when you're going to bump into one next."

Bergmann snorted.

"They're out in force," Granby agreed. He pointed to the billboard. "What do you think of that guy?"

"Morgan? The way I see it, Phil, presidential candidates are like funerals and caves: you've seen one, you've seen them all. And if you have ever heard one, you have surely heard them all."

Granby laughed. "That's the truth."

"You know," Glenn went on, warming to the topic, "they fall all over themselves trying to show me how much they care about me and my family. It's the same line every four years: 'Give me your vote, and when I get to the White House you'll be the last thing I think about at night, the first thing on my mind in the morning, and what I dream about in between.' But the minute the votes are all counted, they hop on their Lear jets and go off to the next state, and I'm already forgotten. They can't even remember what I look like, much less what I want and need. They're tripping over themselves to get to their next speech or TV interview so they can spread their crap in a new state and care about a whole new bunch of people. And I'm left in my same old house, paying the same high taxes, with my kids still going to the same second-rate schools, wondering whether interest rates will go back up and whether enough people will have small engines break so I can make the payment on my truck for another month. And that guy who spent a few weeks here showing me how much he supposedly 'cares' about me and my neighbors? He gets to move into a five-star hotel they call the White House."

Granby looked at his companion. "That's the best description of a presidential campaign I've ever heard."

Glenn shrugged. "And they wonder why so many folks don't bother to show up for the caucuses."

Bergmann leaned forward and pointed. "You can drop us off at that convenience store. I can call our local contact, and he can meet us here."

"Contact?" This struck Glenn as odd.

"Agent," Granby corrected. "He meant our local insurance agent here."

"Oh."

Glenn turned the truck into a parking lot and stopped in front of the Zip X-press Mart.

"You sure you'll be okay?" he asked as the pair stepped outside. "I can wait a while if you'd like, just to be on the safe side."

Bergmann was already dialing on his cell phone, its service restored, as Granby walked over to the driver's side. Glenn rolled down his window.

"We'll be fine. I want to thank you again for saving us. We'd still be stranded back there if it weren't for you."

"It was nothing," Glenn shrugged. He reached into this shirt pocket and produced a business card. "In case anybody you know here in Iowa has any small engine trouble," he said as he handed it over.

"I'll be sure to tell them," Granby said with a smile that seemed genuinely sad to see Glenn go.

Glenn felt the same way. This was a good man, he thought as he shifted the truck in reverse, swung around, and headed back down Highway 34. A good man.

#

When he walked into the kitchen late that night, Glenn Tupper knew he was in trouble. Debbie was standing at the sink with her back to him once again, putting the last of the just-dried dishes into a cabinet.

"Hi there."

Debbie didn't turn around.

He took off his coat and hung it on a peg by the door, and set the empty thermos in the sink. She didn't look at him.

He opened the refrigerator door. "Is there anything for supper?"

"Supper was three hours ago," she said coldly. "Amber's concert was six hours ago, and basketball practice has been over for an hour."

"Debbie, something came up. This car was broke down on the highway, and these guys needed a ride over to—"

"Well," she said as she spun around on her heels, "maybe those guys won't mind sharing their bed with you tonight. Because you won't be sharing mine." Then she was gone.

Glenn had expected this. He didn't even blame her, really. He hadn't expected the snow to pick up, making the drive back from Osceola longer than he'd planned. He hadn't expected he would have to rewire Old Man Beck's entire corn feeder, either. But the farmer milked more than two hundred head of dairy cows twice every day, and the repair couldn't wait.

Mostly, he hadn't expected to spend the night on the brown imitation leather couch with an old blanket wrapped around him as he stared at the TV and waited to fall asleep. He was watching a Des Moines station, and although he disliked its baby-faced anchorman and his know-it-all smug grin, the news on this channel came on earlier than the others. He figured he could put up with the jackass just long enough to get the final score of the Chicago Bulls game and put this whole miserable day behind him once and for all.

Glenn's mind was wandering as baby face and his overly perky female co-anchor hurried through a recap of the day's events. He would make sure Mrs. Seiz's snowblower was ready and take it to her first thing tomorrow morning. Then he would get the last of the invoices over to his accountant. And Debbie: he'd have to do something to smooth things over with her. And then ...

And just then Phil Granby's handsome face looked at him from the TV screen.

Glenn sat up. There was no mistake; it was the same man he had driven in his pickup earlier that day.

“For nearly twenty years,” a narrator said in a deep voice, “Phil Granby has represented the people of Pennsylvania in the U.S. Senate.” There were shots of Phil shaking hands with soldiers in desert fatigues, Phil talking with David Cameron, Phil speaking on the Senate floor. Phil hugging an African-American girl at an inner city housing project, kneeling before an elderly white woman in a wheelchair, spooning a pile of spaghetti onto a plate at a homeless shelter.

The camera zoomed in on a close-up. “Now I want to take what I’ve learned on Capitol Hill and put it to work for you in the White House,” the senator said.

“Phil Granby for president,” the narrator concluded as Granby happily waved to a group of schoolchildren waving American flags back at him. “Leadership we deserve.”

Then Granby was gone, and a local announcer was shouting about the tremendous savings to be found at Bathroom World’s January Bargain Blowout Bonanza.

Glenn reached for the remote control and shut off the TV. Then he clicked off the lamp on an end table and lay down on the couch.

“Some insurance agent.”

Chapter 2

Des Moines, Iowa

Mrs. Shirley Roswell frowned. She was being asked a question that required her to give an unpleasant answer. Mrs. Shirley Roswell didn't like to say unpleasant things about anyone, even people she had never met, especially when the person in question happened to be the president of the United States.

"Well, no," she reluctantly admitted. "I can't say he's doing a good job."

"I see," a man said off-camera with the soothing empathy of a TV talk show host. "So you think the Democrats haven't led the country in the right direction these last eight years?"

Mrs. Shirley Roswell squirmed. "Not really, no." She looked like she could start crying at any moment. "This is a very hard thing to say when you're a patriotic American, you know."

Craig Huddleston drank deeply from a cup and thanked his personal god a Starbucks had just opened for business around the corner. He looked away from the video monitor, where Mrs. Shirley Roswell's eyes were starting to mist. "My God, they're crucifying that little old lady. How much more of this do I have to watch?"

"Shh!" came from the far end of a polished conference table. Karen Marchall frantically waved her hand, demanding quiet. "Look what happens next."

"So you're going to vote in the Republican caucus this year, then?" the questioner asked, and Mrs. Shirley Roswell nodded.

"And which candidate will you support?"

Mrs. Shirley Roswell's face brightened. "Why, Phil Granby!" The black clouds were instantly gone, and sunshine was back in her voice. "He's such a nice man." She practically beamed as if the senator was her own son.

Karen stood up and turned off the monitor. "That's it! That is what we've got to capitalize on."

Craig rubbed his forehead. She was back on this again, and when Karen sunk her teeth in your ankle, there was no telling how long it would be until she let go. That was why Granby senior staffers called her The Schnauzer behind her back. Calling it to her face would have invited an all-out mauling.

"Karen, Karen, Karen," he moaned as he took refuge in his coffee. "I've got to tackle ten thousand things right now, and rehashing this isn't on my to-do list."

She opened a manila folder and waved papers in the air. "Look at this focus group summary. Just scan it. It says the very thing Ma Kettle just said in that interview. It shows how we can break out of the pack."

A new voice spoke up. "Poll after poll after poll says it loud and clear: Iowa Republicans don't want warm and fuzzy. They want substance. They want red meat. They want a solid stand on core issues. They want ..."

The Schnauzer suddenly turned on Josh Gardner, the campaign's communications director and messaging guru. Karen was policy director. And as campaign manager, Craig Huddleston

was once again the referee in an increasingly ugly fight between the two. Granby wasn't gaining traction in Iowa; not only was he in serious danger of becoming an "also ran," he was likely to wind up as the answer on the back of a card in a future edition of Trivial Pursuit. "*Which candidate won the least votes ever in the Iowa Republican presidential caucuses?*"

With two weeks to go and the campaign still stuck in the starting gate, the staff was turning on each other. District coordinators said the TV ads were poorly written and produced. Fundraising said the press folks weren't getting enough news coverage to back their efforts. Communications insisted on one thing; policy wanted to go another way.

And topping it all off, the candidate's car had broken down on a highway somewhere just west of nowhere the day before, making him miss the chance to talk to an important gathering of small business owners in Ottumwa. Scheduling was scrambling to fit it back onto the calendar, the local county chairwoman was howling in anger and, if Craig guessed right, communications and policy were inches away from ripping each other's faces off.

Craig closed his eyes as the bickering swirled around him. How had he been dragged into this rat hole?

That was easy. Phil Granby. "Granby the Good," The Washington *Post* once called him. In the time of Clinton's impeachment, Bush's ineptness, and Obama's inability to deliver on the expectations he himself had raised so high, Granby stood out in the Senate as a thoughtful, decent man. He wasn't a mental giant by any stretch. But he had common sense, and he was smart enough to hire bright people to work for him. He listened to what they said, measured their input against his own knowledge and experience, and then acted—or didn't act. He wasn't a leader in the Senate, but he wasn't a blind follower, either. If he went along, it was because he chose to go.

Then there was his decency. Some men have charm, others sex appeal; some have charisma, others have the ability to convince and persuade. Phillip Granby projected something honest and sincere, something solid and sure of himself. He wasn't a Boy Scout, wasn't "sensitive" in that annoying eighties way or even someone "in touch with his inner self" in that even more annoying nineties way. He was someone you believed, because he gave you no reason to disbelieve. He didn't preen, pose, or position himself. He simply said "yes" or "no" or "let me think about it," and that was it. And after a trio of two-term presidents who had driven the country into increasingly deepening division and polarizing opposition, Craig saw Granby as a breath of political fresh air, a chance to restore to the political system the integrity it had once known.

So when the call came, he had met Granby and a couple of inner circle advisers for lunch in the back corner of a Capitol Hill restaurant one bright summer day. By week's end the twice-divorced forty-three-year-old father of two children he seldom saw but always missed loaded his high-mileage Saturn with the essentials (clothes, some books, and several bottles of his cherished Dewar's Scotch) and headed off to Pittsburgh where he set about giving birth to a presidential campaign.

Now, nearly eighteen months later, things were going so poorly he decided to come to the nation's first presidential battleground state and take control of the troops himself. So he sat here in the suburban Des Moines strip mall that housed Granby's Iowa campaign headquarters listening to Karen, a thirty-two-year-old expert considered by some the best policy wonk in the

business, locked in mortal combat with Josh, a thirty-seven-year-old research whiz who was well-respected for his work on the Hill.

“Nice guy sells,” The Schnauzer was shouting, “and we’d better start selling it fast.”

“And the people who care more about terrorism and the economy,” Josh snapped, “will start shopping for a candidate who takes this election as seriously as they do!”

Craig looked down into his paper cup. Empty. He got up, closed the conference room door behind him, put on a thick coat, and made the day’s second walk to Starbucks.

#

Creston

Glenn Tupper listened as his accountant spewed out a round of fiscal babble he simply could not follow.

“When you look at the discretionary corporate income in relation to your business’ monthly outgoing expenses, Glenn, offset by mitigation allowance factors such as depreciable deductions and other costs ...”

He felt like his family’s dog Brownie, and he looked at the accountant the way Brownie looked at him when he talked. “Blah blah blah, Glenn, blah blah blah blah.”

Walter’s boy was doing the talking. Glenn didn’t care much for Walter’s boy. He wasn’t just a CPA as Walter had been. He had a master’s degree in accounting from Iowa State University and liked to talk as if he had won the Nobel Prize for Economics. Walter had been a good old-fashioned accountant and had kept the books and prepared the tax forms for Glenn for years, and for Glenn’s father before that. Then Walter had retired and moved off to Arizona and had sold the business to his youngest son Scott. So Glenn stayed with Walter’s boy, even though he didn’t particularly like Scott, much less understand him. That was how you did business in Creston.

“Now put it in English, Scott,” he said through a grin to avoid sounding harsh.

“Well ...” Scott seemed to struggle for the right layman’s words. “You’re gonna take a bad tax hit this year.”

That Glenn understood. Too well. He swallowed. “How bad is it gonna be?”

“Eight, maybe nine thousand.”

Glenn whistled sharply. “That’s a lot of broken lawnmowers.”

Walter’s boy closed a folder. “We can always request an extension. People do it all the time.”

Glenn shrugged. “But you’ve got to pay it sooner or later.”

They shook hands, and Glenn stepped out into the biting cold. It was a sunny day, but there was no warmth in the sunshine, and he shivered inside his coat. He turned the key three times before the truck finally started. Nine thousand dollars in taxes? He wouldn’t be hitting the car lots anytime soon.

He steered the old pickup toward the highway, where a visit to the floral department at Price Whopper Supermarket awaited. Serious damage control was waiting for him at home. And nothing helped like roses.

#

Cedar Rapids, Iowa

It seemed the stream of workers coming out of the brick building would never end. They wore blue jeans and work boots and thick, down-filled plastic coats. They carried lunch pails and cell phones, and a few were already smoking cigarettes as they moved toward their waiting cars and trucks in the parking lot as fast as their legs could carry them. And there, at the far end of the chain link fence that surrounded the furniture factory, stood Senator Phillip Granby.

“Hi there,” he would say, extending his right hand for a shake, “Phil Granby. I’m running for president.”

Most of the workers were polite. They had endured this quaint political ritual like clockwork every four years for decades and accepted it with benign indifference. They somehow sensed that this was their role on the political stage, that they were bit players in the video that showed up on the local news and CNN and Fox News from time to time: the Great Man meets the Common Man on his path to power.

Some, younger people mostly, brushed past the candidate with a slight smile as if to say, “I really don’t mean to be an asshole about this, but I just don’t give a damn about your campaign, and it’s cold as a mother out here, and all I want to do is get inside my SUV and turn on the heater as fast as I can. It’s nothing personal, you understand. But I wouldn’t stand out here to shake hands with the pope.”

A few, older ones mostly, could always be counted on to stop and chat. And someone with a particular gripe or complaint, like the woman whose husband had a problem getting his Social Security disability benefits; or a Vietnam War veteran who wanted to compare Iraq to his war forty years ago, now that was a real war, let me tell you, none of this high-tech shit in the jungle, you know, just Charlie and me and my old M16 rifle; or maybe someone who wanted to let you know they liked your TV commercials the best of all the candidates’ commercials, and so they were planning on voting for you. There were always just enough of these people to make the video look good on the evening news—just enough to justify the ongoing practice of this inane rite that was now nothing more than an easy photo-op.

But there were no TV cameras here this afternoon, local or network, and Granby’s press person was practically having a seizure. The day’s schedule had been overhauled to accommodate this event, which the campaign’s local contact had assured them would draw plenty of free media coverage. And it might have, if a school bus hadn’t overturned a few hours earlier while taking kids home for the day, sending six of them to a hospital instead. So the reporters and TV cameras had rushed there and all the Granby camp got was a photographer from The Cedar Rapids *Gazette* (no reporter) and a microphone from a local AM radio station.

And of course, Jarma was there, too.

Jarma Jordan sat in the ironically named “media van,” ironic since media is a plural and she was often its sole occupant on campaign outings. She was banging away on the keyboard of her Dell laptop, stopping every few minutes to absorb the latest developments, then bending back over it to write some more.

Jarma was a political blogger, that ever-evolving addition to the campaign coverage crew that all candidates in both parties were struggling to adjust to. And Jarma was a particularly good one.

A twenty-five-year-old graduate student at the University of Missouri's revered School of Journalism, she was among a handful of young people who had won a prestigious Citizen Journalism Fellowship to cover the presidential primary season, each embedded within a different campaign. "Citizen journalists" was the phrase academia used to clothe bloggers with a layer of credibility, but the term made Jarma laugh. The way she saw it, she was the only "citizen" involved in her effort. It was her eyes, ears, and brain, her contacts and connections, her laptop computer, and at day's end, her writing ability. She saw nothing wrong with calling herself exactly what she was: a blogger.

Jarma's work was immensely readable, largely because Jarma herself was so quirky. Her appearance stopped just short of bohemian: a self-designed style originally intended to horrify her parents and teachers back home in Huntsville, Alabama, later modified into her personal signature. Her close-cut hair was usually dyed a shade of bright red that would have made Lenin proud, though she tipped her hat to conventionality these days by keeping it more of a rusted ocean liner hull tone instead. Calling her clothing "eclectic" was an understatement; a fellow grad student once described her as "a thrift shop on legs." She was short and quiet and had an odd ability to blend into the scenery, despite her outrageous attire, whenever it suited her purposes. She had nothing to do with cigarettes and drugs but drank vodka like a fish, stopping for long stretches of abstinence when serious work was at hand. And there was a certain uncertainty about her sexual orientation; back in Columbia, she had reportedly been seen sometimes with men, sometimes with women, though nobody seemed to have a firm take on just which team she played for.

She was thoughtful, studious, and seemed like someone who probably kept cats in a loft apartment. But she had an eye that was hard to fool. She saw clearly, thought clearly, wrote clearly. And as a result, she often spotted things that others missed. There was much debate that season about whether political blogs were this election cycle's latest plaything—or whether the wave of the future had arrived on a hundred laptop screens. However it turned out, Jarma Jordan's voice would be heard.

Just now, Jarma was learning something political correspondents dating back to H. L. Mencken in the 1920s have struggled to answer: how do you take a tedious, repetitious event and make it sound fresh to your readers and unlike the twenty-seven identical events you have described to them lately?

She reached over and wiped the steam from her breath off the window. In an age of four-dollar-a-gallon gas, Granby's campaign couldn't afford to leave the van's engine running. So she struggled to stay warm as she followed the scene at the factory gate while listening to Hitler's Nephews, a college band she had fallen in love with while Granby campaigned in Ames, on her MP3 player. And then it hit her. She started typing across the top of the screen.

Do you think they do this in China? Senator Phillip Granby stands outside a factory in Cedar Rapids. It's Friday afternoon, and the week is finally over for workers here. They've just punched the clock and are hurrying to pick up the kids

from daycare, maybe grab a six-pack, have a good dinner, and put the assembly line behind them until Monday morning.

But they must first jump over one final hurdle before they can taste freedom.

There's the good senator, gloved hand at the ready and a pearly white smile beaming across his wide, handsome face. The workers must run this political gauntlet just to reach their vehicles.

Mercifully, there are no reporters here today, no inane former beauty queens posing as hard news journalists to harass them for their opinion of this year's campaign or of this candidate. Just a well-meaning man who hopes to pick up a vote or two for his trouble.

So I ask: with all the jobs that have been exported to China over the last twenty years, do you think they took this time-honored tradition with them? Do you think somewhere in Nanjing a little guy is standing outside some factory with his hand stuck out, saying, "Hi, I'm Gan Pin Hao, and I'd like another term on the Communist Party's Central Committee. I'd really appreciate your support"?

You can't help but wonder.

She hit "save" and smiled the same smile generations of earlier political correspondents had smiled when they pulled another rabbit out of their editorial hats.

#

Creston

Red roses were in a vase on the kitchen table when Debbie came home. It was after sundown, and Glenn was waiting in soft light in the family room.

"Who are these for?" she asked from the kitchen.

"You," he answered.

"They're lovely," she said in an uncommitted tone, not ready to reveal whether or not they would sway her forgiveness. He heard rustling and imagined she was taking off her coat and gloves.

When she walked into the family room, Glenn held out a glass of white wine. "It's that kind you like, that pinot stuff."

"Pinot grigio," she corrected, and sipped. "It's Italian."

"All I know is it tastes delicious." Glenn drank from his own glass and punched a button on a remote control hidden in his other hand. Across the room, James Taylor began singing "Something in the Way She Moves" on a CD.

"Okay, what's going on?" Debbie demanded. "The flowers, the wine, the music. What are you up to?"

Glenn took her in his arms and began slowly dancing. He wasn't comfortable and disliked dancing, so he moved hesitantly, awkwardly. She felt like a stiff board and kept a space between them.

“I want to say I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“For what?”

He knew that she knew what he meant, but he also knew she wanted to hear it from him.

“For being such a jerk this week.”

“About time you admit it.” Debbie took another sip of wine over his shoulder, and ever so slowly began swaying.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there when I said I would be. I’m sorry I let you down and you got stuck with handling everything.”

He felt her inch closer. She swayed a little more.

“Are you going to be better about helping out around here?” she asked, looking into his eyes for the first time.

Glenn saw in them just how much she wanted his help. He saw those eyes every day, but how long had it been since he had taken the time to actually look into them? This was turning into something different for him. It was no longer about trying to get back into her good graces; it was winning her heart all over again. “I will,” he said, and he meant it.

She pressed firmly against him and swayed in unison from side to side, covering his ungainly movements with a smooth sensuality. It felt like it did when they first met, and suddenly the tension that had built up between them washed away.

“Where are the kids?” she whispered.

“Amber is spending the night with a friend, and Bennett is at my mom’s house. We’re all alone.”

She downed her glass in one final swallow, put it on the coffee table, took his hand, and led him to their bedroom.

#

Cedar Rapids

Twenty-eight people were crammed inside the small bakers’ union hall. They sat on gray metal folding chairs lined up on a linoleum floor. Union banners and posters adorned the walls. A wooden podium with a microphone stood at the front of the room; a folding table in back was ready with refreshments. The local had voted to make the hall tobacco-free several years earlier, so some members smelled heavily of smoke after coming in from the stoop.

Granby was introduced, his hosts were thanked, a polite joke was made about how unlikely it was for a Republican to address a union audience, and tepid, scattered laughter was given in return.

Then Granby launched into The Speech. He had been giving it in one form or another since announcing his candidacy the previous fall; now he knew it by memory. Still, Bergmann had placed the obligatory paper copy on the podium, complete with local references and updated lines fresh from the communications team.

It was called “I See an America,” and it had been written by a very talented and well-connected speechwriter in Washington—for a very large amount of money. It had been tested on focus groups, had been analyzed by the pundits, and had been repeated all across Iowa to farmers

and bankers, to college students and retirees, even to local neighborhood homeowner association meetings. Craig took the biblical approach to getting his candidate out among the people— (“*wherever two or more are gathered*”)—and any request for an appearance, big or small, was given serious consideration by scheduling. Besides, when your standing in the polls was so low you needed a magnifying glass to see it, beggars weren’t in a position to be choosers.

So Granby stood there in Cedar Rapids this January night, talking with bakers who had been up since before dawn making fresh breads and pastries. Now he was telling them the same things he had told so many other groups: “I see an America where want and need become relics from the past ... I see an America where honest working men and women receive an honest wage for their labor ... I see an America where the environment is given the same protection that Pentagon contractors now receive ...”

And they were yawning. They weren’t rude; these were Iowans, after all, and politeness was bred into them. But this was nothing they hadn’t heard before. Looking at their faces, watching some nod as they fought off sleep, watching others sneak glances at their watches, some even staring down and counting the tiles on the floor, Granby suddenly understood what the people in the folding chairs knew: this was more of the same prepackaged hot air they heard from candidate after candidate.

Just as Granby was vowing eternal vigilance against all terrorists, “To the foes of freedom who never stop scheming new ways to harm our country, let me just say ...” he stopped. He simply closed his mouth and quit talking.

At first, this was taken as a dramatic effect, and the bakers didn’t notice. But the seconds grew longer and longer, and he stood there looking at them, mouth drawn shut, as if he had all the time in the world. This brought them back to attention; even the noddors were now awake and wondering what was going on. A politician—not talking? It wasn’t natural.

Granby stayed silent, as if waiting for someone from the audience to say something. Some were leaning forward in their chairs now. Whatever they had seen and heard from other candidates before, they had never seen this.

Granby looked down at his feet. “You know,” he began, his voice turned soft, as if he were chatting with a friend and not delivering a speech. “If I lived in Iowa and was one of you fine folks, I’d sure get tired of people like me coming through here every four years. Because you’ve heard it time after time. The same damn thing. And every four years, we keep coming, just like an assembly line straight from Washington, DC.”

Granby took papers off the lectern and waved them over his head. “This is my speech. The stuff you’ve heard so often before. I paid twenty-five thousand bucks for a guy in Washington just to write these pages.”

He tore them in half with a loud rip and let them fall. The hall had grown so silent the paper could almost be heard hitting the floor.

“So enough games, good people of Iowa. Let’s talk, just you and me.”

Bergmann looked like he was having a stroke. In the rear corner of the hall, Jarma was typing as fast as her fingers could move. And every baker was hanging on his words, eager to see where this was going.

Granby licked his lips. He had never felt so exhilarated, so alive, in his entire political life. He took off his suit coat and pulled his tie knot away from the collar.

“You see, I’m dead last of all the Republicans who are running this time. The so-called experts tell me how a good candidate should dress, what he should say, what he shouldn’t say, tell me the things they think you want to hear. Well starting here, starting now, I’m done with all that.”

Somewhere, from the back row of folding chairs, a pair of hands began clapping. Soon a few more joined in.

“I was talking to my new friend Tupper the other day. He’s a working man, just like you folks. And you know what Tupper told me?”

Heads were shaking; they didn’t know what Tupper had said, but they were eager to find out.

“Once every four years, candidates just like me fall all over ourselves trying to show you how much we care about you and your family. Oh we care, all right. We’re wholesale distributors of ‘caring.’ We buy care in bulk quantity, and then we spend months spreading it all across the country, just like manure. At least, wherever people happen to be voting.”

They laughed, and this time the laughter was genuine. They knew what he meant. They were getting it.

“It’s the same tired old line every four years,” Granby went on. “We come around, and we whine and beg, ‘Give me your vote, and when I get to the White House, you’ll be the last thing I think about at night, the first thing on my mind in the morning, and what I dream about in between.’ But you know what really happens?”

“You don’t give a damn about us!” someone shouted, and they all laughed, including Granby, who quipped, “I dream about Scarlett Johansson, not you!” and they laughed even louder.

“Once the last votes are counted,” he went on as they settled down, “we hop in our fancy private jets and go on to the next state and start our cheap ‘caring’ routine all over again.”

More nods from the crowd. Some looked like they couldn’t believe their ears. They were hearing honesty. They were hearing the truth. They were hearing someone speak straight from his heart.

“And what about you? Well, to be painfully honest, you’re already forgotten. We can’t even remember what you look like, much less what you want and need. See, we’re falling all over ourselves to get to our next speech or TV interview so we can spread our crap in a new state and start ‘caring’ about a whole new bunch of people.”

They were clapping now. Granby didn’t know twenty-eight people could make so much noise. Some were whistling, and some were stomping their feet. Finally, it seemed, someone knew what it felt like to be *them*. And they were hanging on every word he said.

Granby savored the feeling. He remembered Glenn Tupper’s words and pressed on. “And you? After all the promises and lies and half-truths and semi-truths? What about you? You’re stuck in your same old house, paying the same taxes, with your kids still going to the same second-rate schools, wondering if interest rates are going to start shooting up again and whether you can pay your taxes come April.

“And that guy who spent a few weeks here, showing you how much he ‘cared’ about you and your neighbors? He gets to move into a five-star hotel they call the White House.”

They jumped to their feet, hollering and banging their hands together and cheering.

“You want to end the games once and for all? You want to see this country finally shift gears and start moving in the right direction? Then please, for the love of God, show up at your caucus and vote for Phil Granby. Thank you!”

They came at him like a wave on the ocean, rushing the podium to shake his hand and speak to him. They reached into their wallets and brought out ten- and twenty-dollar bills and thrust them at him. They asked if they could volunteer to help his campaign, asked if he would come back and talk to their churches, to their civic groups, even offering to let him spend the night in their homes if he needed a place to stay.

Bergmann was scrambling to write down names and phone numbers in the little notebook he always carried.

Jarma was typing furiously, describing what she could only call a political version of Lazarus coming back from the dead.

And Phil Granby, man of the hour and astute politician that he was, suddenly sensed his days at the back of the pack were finally over.

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