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Dearing and Yonelson

They peered about the lobby with hard, calculating, the eyes, the eyes of experienced predators. Without doubt, the two men were either policemen or party storm troopers. She knew they sought her. Who else could they want?

She led too bland a life to interest policemen, so she wondered which party the men represented, and why they wanted her at the worst of all times. The Republicans might want to gloat; the Democrats would come with another vindictive lesson, "I told you so's" loose and ready. She sank deeper into her easy chair, hoping to fold it around her and so escape detection.

No such luck. The two scanned the hotel lobby like machines, inspecting each standing body and each of the mainly empty chairs. They found her, and weaved their way across the wide, cluttered expanse of floor. She came to grips with the reality of her moment, and forced that electric smile everyone found so captivating.

"Governor Dearing?" the tall one inquired. Except for basics like height and weight, these people all looked alike. Were they bred for the purpose, or manufactured? "Excuse me, ma'am. You're Governor Anna Marie Dearing, of California."

She radiated a friendliness she did not feel. "I'm afraid you've made a mistake. I haven't been a governor in over three years. Right now, I'm just Anna. And you are...?"

"My name is McDonnel, Jack McDonnel. This is Tim Peterson. We're from the National Committee, just messengers, really."

"The National Committee," she echoed, feigning curiosity. "Which National Committee, may I ask?"

McDonnel seemed taken aback. "Why, the Democratic Party, of course. May I pull up a seat?" They both pulled up seats.

"I was at the dinner tonight," McDonnel said. "Great speech.

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Oratory is a lost art these days, but you remind us just how well a phrase can turn.”

“Why, thank-you, Jack McDonnel. You certainly know how to charm a girl. And how did you like the evening, Mr. Peterson?”

Peterson seemed a lot younger than McDonnel, perhaps in his mid-twenties. Anna knew who led and who followed. Still, she wanted Peterson to feel part of the group even in what was a two-way conversation. He seemed startled that she would ask his opinion of anything.

“I enjoyed myself fine, Governor, I mean, Miss Dearing. I’ve followed your career for years, ever since high school. I’m glad I got to see you in person.”

“Ever since high school, eh? I’m glad you’re such a fan, dear. Now, try not to remind this little old lady of her advanced age, if you don’t mind.”

There was an instant of silence, then Anna and McDonnel both broke into laughter at Peterson’s expense.

“Don’t worry, darlin’,” Anna said. “You haven’t made me feel like an old lady *yet*, though I suppose that could just be a middle-aged delusion.”

McDonnel rescued his partner. “Governor, I have to say that we didn’t come here to congratulate you on your speech. As I said, we’re messengers. The National Committee has entrusted us to bring to you a sensitive concern.”

“Does the party have any other kinds of concern? Look, Mr. McDonnel, I don’t see what the party wants with me. I’m running independently of party support, I haven’t bad-mouthed any Democrats, and I don’t stand a chance next month in New Hampshire. Maybe the party should get sensitive with someone more notable in the field.”

“Are things not going well?”

“I suppose the party has authorized you to ask that question, as well as bring up your sensitive concern? Things are just wonderful, Mr. McDonnel, but there are eleven candidates for the nomination, and conservative New Hampshire and my brand of politics do not mix well. I don’t expect to be a factor until California.”

“I see.” McDonnel nodded his head in sympathy, and leaned forward in his chair. “We know the situation, Governor. As close as we can figure, you’re nearly out of money. You don’t have the funds

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to compete in California. Contributions continue to dry up as people lose confidence in the party's ability to take this election. On top of that, you're still paying on loans from last time around. You're going into a primary you can't win, and no way to bounce back afterward. Your campaign is over."

Anna chilled inside. The purpose of this meeting grew clear to her. She chose her response carefully, beginning with a mocking copy of McDonnell's sympathetic nod. "Uh-huh. Let me guess. You've been given the thankless job of removing an obstacle to a smooth primary. Your bosses want to narrow the field, unite the party early, concentrate on targeting the president, not each other. Then maybe the contributors will return, the war chest will grow, and we'll have a chance of recapturing the White House. Am I fairly accurate so far?"

"Yes, ma'am. The party considers the president vulnerable, what with the war in the Balkans and the terrorist problem and all that. But he isn't so vulnerable that a divided party can defeat him, or a party perceived by the public as divided."

"You want a year long campaign against the president, waged by as few candidates as possible, few enough in a campaign long enough to make the public pause, and think seriously about alternatives to the incumbency."

"Exactly."

"Uh-huh." Anna sat back further in her chair. She adapted her position of most authority, crossing her legs, entwining her fingers, and resting her elbows on the armrests. "Sounds like a solid battle plan, Mr. McDonnell. But I see one major flaw in it." She tapped her chest. "This little obstacle does not intend to quit. *This* little obstacle does not intend to step aside for someone else in the name of party unity." She leaned forward. "*This* little obstacle has sacrificed enough of herself on the altar of party unity, and is convinced that it's somebody else's damned turn, for a change."

The two party functionaries looked aghast. Anna's eyes darted between them, accusatory. Peterson spoke first.

"Now, hold on, ma'am, you have it all wrong!" People stared at them from across the lobby.

"Quiet!" McDonnell turned and faced Anna with a mixture of tight-jawed determination and extreme caution. "Governor, you don't understand as much as I figured. We aren't here to ask you out

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of the race. We're here to offer you the Democratic nomination for president of the United States."

Anna leaned back in her chair. Her mind raced to process McDonnell's words, to determine their truth and the meaning of their truth. She could understand a shut down, but did they ask her to once more carry the standard for her peers? Read the fine print, Anna Marie.

"Your analysis was on target," McDonnell continued. "The party wants to narrow the field, to get everyone behind a single candidate as soon as possible. *You* are that candidate."

"I ran for president three years ago. I lost. Why does the party want me again? Most people only get one shot at this sort of thing."

"You're the perfect candidate. Your philosophy is inclusive, and this will be the first election, according to the census, in which there is no majority influence in our country. Anglo-America has always controlled the electoral process, but white people only make up 44% of the population today. We think you could build a winning coalition of moderate and liberal whites, women, and people of color."

"I tried that last time. I still lost."

"You've also come out solidly against the use of troops in the Balkans. Public opinion was with the president when he sent in the Marines as United Nations observers. Now that our troops have expanded their mission to include combat operations, people are changing their minds."

"I'm not the only Democratic candidate to speak out against the war."

McDonnell looked off to one side. There was something he didn't want to say.

Anna fished for his real purpose. "Senator Mackie has come out against the war, and he sits on the Foreign Relations Committee. He's a very qualified candidate, a known factor to the public, a good bet. I'd never say these things to his face, and I'd never point them out to the public, considering that we're competitors, but your bosses are well aware of his qualifications. Mackie is a solid candidate. So are others in the field."

"Yes, ma'am, but they're all white males. You're the only black woman candidate we have."

She noted his stiffened demeanor, the deep frown. So, that was

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it. She offered him a tired sigh.

“Uh-*huh*,” she said in her characteristic way, and stared into the lobby at nothing in particular. She sat silently for a moment.

“I’m very disappointed, Mr. McDonnel. You can tell that to your bosses.” She turned back to the two men, noting their black suits, white shirts, and short haircuts, the iconic costumes of white, middle class America and its Big Brother. “Have you followed politics long, Mr. McDonnel?”

“I’ve been with the party for fifteen years.”

“Good. Think back a few years. If you recall, the previous president was popular with the conservative middle and upper classes. His VP rode his coattails. The National Committee decided to run me against that former vice-president, but neglected to tell me that it was just a token effort. They thought the White House a lost cause in 2052, so they decided to position the party for a good run in ’56. They picked a black woman candidate to symbolize the party’s commitment to the working and underclasses, the traditional Democratic base, but then blew off their responsibility to that candidate. You know why, Mr. McDonnel? To save the money! Why drain the party on a longshot, when they could back a *real* candidate four years down the line?”

Her voice remained level the whole time, but grew tighter the more she spoke. By the time she finished, the words spat from her mouth like venom.

Anna sat back in her chair, feigning a relaxed posture. Unconsciously, she removed her glasses, and wiped them with a soft cloth taken from an inside pocket of her blazer. Once she felt more in control of her voice, she addressed the men again.

“I went alone against the entire Republican machine. So, you’ll excuse me, gentlemen, if I approach your offer with a level of skepticism.”

McDonnel’s tone was curt. “So, you don’t want the nomination? You don’t want to be president?”

“I want to be president *on my own terms*. I don’t trust your bosses, Mr. McDonnel. They’re a conniving bunch of rattlesnakes, as far as I’m concerned.”

McDonnel’s response was immediate. “I’ve worked directly for Al Bennett since ’52. The man is no rattlesnake. Are you sure you aren’t rationalizing your own failure as a candidate, Governor?”

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Anna stiffened. “Al Bennett knows I’m a draft horse of a candidate. He also knows where to put the blame for the ’52 defeat. Alone, underfunded, with no help from him, I garnered 37% of the vote. His leg is probably still out of joint from kicking himself in the ass.”

Anna and the storm trooper exchanged measuring glares. Finally, McDonnell stood up, and Peterson followed his example.

“Well, I guess that’s it,” McDonnell said. “I’m to tell the committee you don’t want the nomination?”

She put her glasses on. He wasn’t such a blur through them. “I *said* I would take the nomination on *my* terms, and *my* terms only. If the committee would accept those terms, then I *might* consider a partnership.”

“And what, may I ask, are those terms?”

She showed a thin smile. “For starters, my people sit on the election committee. We control assignments. We control the purse.”

“You really *don’t* want the nomination, do you?”

“We also set the platform. It’ll be a real platform, one I can believe in.”

“You know as well as I that the delegates to the convention set the platform. It’s called democracy.”

“The party is *not* a democracy, Mr. McDonnell. I run on *my* vision, not the liberal-left agenda that has kept us from the White House for over thirty years.”

McDonnell nodded. “Anything else?”

Anna’s calculated grin expanded to light the room. “We’ll sleep on it, Mr. McDonnell. You tell Al those are my conditions. If he doesn’t like them, he’ll have to go hunt up a white boy.”



They left. Anna sat an hour longer in her chair, rocking back and forth, staring into the future. Before McDonnell and Peterson, she had thought the future irrelevant. Her campaign finances had shrunk to only a few week’s reserves. Her people, scattered among their rooms in the hotel, already made inquiries about jobs back home. She pictured them lying despondently on their beds, staring at their TV sets. Or maybe they huddled over pizza in small groups, wondering in monotones what had gone wrong. She owed them more than the pitiable effort already endured, a campaign dead before the first primary. If the National Committee succumbed to her blackmail, she

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could deliver more.

She knew she could topple the incumbent president. He resided over a nation badgered by fear, fear of crime, of falling into war, but mostly fear of each other. The demographics said everything. The Anglo birthrate continued to stagnate. The Hispanic community grew faster than any other, a third faster than black America, over twice as fast as the whites. With population trends changing so dramatically, whites lost the political hegemony they had always enjoyed. Would they surrender that power willingly, as faith in America's one man, one vote philosophy demanded? Anna imagined her nation destroying itself over race. Sad. With cooperation, it could finally live out its credo of equality.

She could make that credo live. But first she had to get the nomination. Then she had to consolidate her position to avoid an ambush by the National Committee. The days of candidates leading the party had long gone from American politics. Orwell's Big Brother had moved in, unpacked, and settled in for the long haul. His hand lay over the party pocketbook, and over a sympathetic and often gullible news media. His drones were the lackluster officeholders who looked good on TV, but knew their stance on the issues only through party memos and briefings. Since many qualified, caring people shunned politics and the overbearing machine that ran it, few of those in high office were strong enough or wise enough to stay there. They were puppeteered by the shadow functionaries: the committee chairmen, the big contributors, the bureaucrats in sensitive places, and, not least in the political machine, the chairman of the National Committee itself. Compared to that power, a president was little more than the shadow of a flea. Few successfully strove against the needs of their machine.

Even so, the Democrats were not unusual on the American political landscape. The same things were true of the Republican party. The Republicans, in fact, being more organized than their competitors, had gotten there first.

The game consumed Anna's life. She had no children and had never been married, except to the party. She knew the pressures of conformity, but she hoped that a talented, determined person could persevere against them. She wanted to try, keeping in mind the lessons learned from her last dismal attempt. She could regain the White House for the Democrats. She could help reassert their power

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on Capitol Hill. But she could not become another figurehead president.

She rose from her chair with a vigor much removed from the fatigue she had felt a short time before. What a difference an hour can make! She strode to the reception desk and flashed a radiant smile at the clerk. "House phone, please," she said. The clerk smiled back, infected by her buoyant mood, and a palm phone materialized from somewhere behind the counter.

"682," Anna said into the mouthpiece. She heard the computerized "thank you", then the buzzer on the other end. She could hardly wait to tell Ray the news.

"Yo!"

"Ray! Anna Marie. Got a minute?"

"Go ahead, Chief. We're just sitting around a pizza box."

Her smile broadened. "Ray, you'll never guess who I ran into."

"How about two storm troopers from downtown?"

"My, I'm impressed. Did you bring a crystal ball on the campaign trail?"

"They were up here looking for you an hour or so ago. So, are we officially shut down, or what?"

"Not exactly. Are you sitting down, Ray? You don't have a mouthful of Coke? Nothing in there you might choke on?"

"It's worse, isn't it? What could they do that's *worse*?"

"They offered me the nomination."

Nothing. Silence on the other end.

"Ray?"

"Sorry, Chief. I bent down to pick up my jaw. Did I hear you right?"

"They offered me the nomination. Practically begged me to take it."

She felt the intensity of his thoughts. He pored over the news, worrying it like a tenacious dog with a bone. Ray was a campaigner, like her. He wanted to shake loose the pitfalls of this new development to prevent it becoming the nasty surprise its potential allowed.

"I suppose they want to control the campaign. Could be setting you up, like last time."

"They won't get the chance. We'll see to that. I've set certain conditions for acceptance. I'd like to talk them over with the crew."

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“You bet. Come on up. They’ll be here before you hit the elevator.”

“On my way. Save me a bite of pizza.”



Ray Yonelson stood in the hall as Anna approached his door. He was a lanky young man of twenty-seven, his red beard and tousled red hair making him look much older. His tie hung askew and his white shirtsleeves were rolled up. His hands pushed deep into his pockets, and he rocked back and forth on his shoeless feet. He watched his boss with earnest eyes. Anna had always thought Ray a little tense. He was a hopeless workaholic and suspicious of everything, which was why he made an effective campaign manager. It also meant stiff, often perfunctory conversations; workhorse zealots made poor social partners. She loved him just the same. In the last five years, she and Ray had been through a lot together.

“The gang here?” She gave him a tight, sisterly hug.

Ray steered her through the half open doorway and down the short entrance hall of his hotel room. She liked the feel of his arm across her shoulders. Relaxed but solid, it projected the character and strength of its owner. She saw nothing untoward in his escorting her like that. The two were close in the way combat veterans were close, or policemen were close to their partners. And his nearly six and a half foot frame put her shoulder at an unconsciously convenient height for him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the president of the United States,” he said as they entered the greater part of the room. It was a joke from early in the campaign that had taken on an increasingly morbid tone. The small group looked up from their pizza, but did not rise to meet her. They were too long together for that kind of formality. There was Kate Clancy, press secretary, immaculately elegant in her Hugo BOSS suit. Kate had never looked less than perfect; it was a trait Anna envied. The campaign treasurer, chief fund-raiser, and budget chief fleshed out the group; they all sat around in tired suits or skirts and tops, holding pizza slices like forgotten offerings in their hands. Then there was Parker Nguyen, Anna’s campaign gunslinger, security man, problem solver and firefighter. With so little campaign at the moment, there was precious little fire to fight. He lay sprawled on the far bed, just turned away from the TV. Parker did not eat meat, or any other animal product, to include mozzarella cheese. He

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sat up, and made a space for Anna.

"The Last Supper," Ray said after the barrage of greetings subsided. He handed her a slice of pizza. "We wanted to get it out of petty cash, but *no* cash is petty anymore."

"So, what's the deal?" Parker asked. "They trying to run you off? Want me to go to Washington and break some heads?" His generally impassive Vietnamese face made it hard to tell when, or if, he was joking.

"I'll take that as a figurative expression, Parker honey. So, you didn't tell them, Ray?"

Ray shook his head. "That's your venue, Chief. I'm not one to upstage the boss."

"Come on," Kate urged. "This is like a spy movie. We've been wondering for hours who those fed types were."

"Ray says they're from downtown," the treasurer said. "From the National Committee. Is that true, governor?"

"Tell us straight," Kate warned, her face mock-serious, "or we take back the pizza."

She told them.

The surprised responses gratified her. She flashed excitement through her eyes. "Okay. Impressions? Sally."

The budget director made an expansive gesture. "Simple arithmetic. Even considering tonight's contributions, we have less than \$180,000 in the bank. If the party comes through, it would mean what, \$800,000,000?"

"It isn't entirely certain that the party *will* come through," Parker said. "They won't like the boss's conditions."

"Are the conditions real, or just smoke?" Ray needed to know how to play the situation. "You said your demands were non-negotiable. Is that for real, or did you pad the offer?"

"There might be some leeway," Anna admitted. "I don't like backing my opponent into a corner. You get better results when you leave them some face."

Parker nodded. He knew about face.

"At any rate," Anna said, "having our people on the election committee, and controlling the purse, those things are non-negotiable. I'm willing to compromise on the platform, but I'm serious about our constantly grumbling left wing. I won't give the Republicans any opportunity to label us as tax-and-spend, socialist,

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big government, fringe community Democrats. We walk into that trap with the regularity of a metronome, and it's about time we wised up."

"I see a more immediate concern," Kate offered. "How do we know the other candidates will step aside? Sure, some are in bad financial shape, but a few sit pretty solid, hoping to impress the party enough to collect that money when their own dries up. Who's to say they'll play the game? *You* didn't."

"That's not my problem." Anna shrugged. "I think we should proceed, at least for now, on the assumption that the party can control the other candidates."

Ray snorted. "If we don't do that, then we close up shop. Without the party, we're dead."

"Exactly." Anna let his statement sink in for a moment. The television mumbled forgotten in the corner, a commercial for the auto show due in town. Flying cars, it promised, as the industry had promised for years without delivering. "Okay, battle plan as follows: get a good night's sleep. In the morning, brainstorm any possible ramifications of getting the party nomination. Build contingencies for every reasonable scenario. Also, we need names for who will be on the election committee and the finance team. I don't want any of you volunteering. I want you with me. Questions? Comments?"

Heads turned to survey the group. No one spoke.

"All right," Ray said, lacing his hands behind his head. "Polish off the chow and get back to your rooms, people. We have a long day ahead. If I know this game at all, you won't sleep again 'til November."

Anna stood. Ray allowed for the expected flurry of congratulations from the group, then tugged her away by the arm.

"Walk you back to your room?" he asked.

She smiled and took his arm. He spoke as they entered the corridor.

"The downtowners will insist on professional heavy hitters to run the campaign."

"I know that, Ray. I've thought about it, and I want my own people, not a bunch of black-suiters with no stake in the outcome."

"Those guys know what they're doing. They do it for a living, for God's sake."

"Uh-huh. They'll package and arrange me until I don't recognize

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myself staring in a mirror. No, thanks. Besides, our people carried me this far, they have a right to the finish.”

They stopped in front of her door. She fumbled in a blazer pocket for her key.

“I figured you’d say that,” Ray nodded. “The others will be glad to hear it. They’re a good crew. I think they can do it for you.”

“But...” She keyed the lock, but made no move to enter the room.

“If they offer, you might be better off to take one of those heavy hitters as campaign manager.”

“Why? Are you quitting the team?”

“We’re losing, Chief, and I’m the campaign manager. Maybe you would do better with someone else.”

She feigned surprise. “Oh, for pity’s sake! Have I ever complained about your work?”

“Often.”

“Well, yes, but I’m obsessive-compulsive. I like to complain. You’re a great campaign manager, Ray. That’s why I went for you the second time around.”

He pushed open the door and flicked on the lights. “I just want what’s best, Chief. You might have a better chance with a pro.”

“Or maybe not. I’m serious. Win or lose, I want my own people around me. That includes you.”

He looked up and down the hall, anywhere but in her eyes. She touched his arm.

“Ray. I like to think we’re going to win. But, you never know how things turn out. If we lose, we lose. It won’t be any failure of yours. You *stick* with me, my friend. I need you.”

“It’s your future.”

“You bet it is. Now, enough of this morbid talk. Think a happy thought and fly away home. Tomorrow’s a long day.”

They exchanged good nights. Then she hugged him, and sent him down the hall.

Inside the room, the door locked behind her, she stretched beside the bed. The evening, which had begun so bleakly, could end with her best night’s sleep in weeks. But one last chore remained. Informing her crew of their surprise good luck had been exhilarating, but one other person should share the news with her. She kicked off her shoes and freed herself of the conservative, proper blazer and

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skirt, and felt more comfortable. Then she sat on the edge of the bed and touched on the phone as she let down her hair.

“Indianapolis,” she told the polite computer operator. “Stephen Tallman.” She gave the robot his number.

She continued to undress to the clicks and tones from the telephone deskset. The damned suits annoyed her. Why couldn’t presidents wear jeans? Hadn’t Jimmy Carter worn jeans? By the time she turned back the bed covers, a familiar bubbly voice spoke into the room.

“Hello! You’ve reached the residence of Stephen and Patricia Tallman. Sorry, but the line is busy. Would you like to leave a message?”

“Alfred, so good to hear you! This is Anna Marie. Are you sure I can’t hold for Steve?”

A pause, and Anna knew Alfred compared her voice to the graph in his security file. “I’m sorry, Anna Marie, but Steve left instructions that he was not to be disturbed. Would you like to leave a message?”

She frowned. “Oh, all right. Please, tell him that I called. I just wanted to talk, and I was half-naked and everything. Maybe I’ll call him tomorrow. And, Alfred? Make sure he gets the message as soon as practical. And don’t let him pull any of that ‘omit housekeeping’ stuff, either.”

“Your message is logged in my priority dialog folder. I will deliver the message when he wakes tomorrow morning.”

“Fair enough. ‘Bye, Alfred. Dream music videos, or whatever you do.”

The line clicked dead.

She put down the phone, disappointed. But, what had she expected? Alfred was a machine. He couldn’t know how much she wanted Steve, or how happy he would be to hear from her. She decided to lobby Steve for an exception to Alfred’s housekeeping protocol. She already enjoyed a preferred macro, voice print and everything, but it hadn’t been much help.

She sighed and turned out the light, then rolled into the cold hotel bed. How many hotel beds had she slept in that year? In the five years previous? She couldn’t say; they all seemed the same. Still, the weeks ahead held promise. Some day soon, the hotel beds would fade into her past. She wondered what would replace them.

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Which bed would welcome her when winter rolled around once more? Would it be one of several in the White House, which was just another hotel, but an infinitely more satisfying one? Or would she settle into the almost forgotten sheets of her bed in Sacramento, a distant fantasy too long in her past? She smiled as she closed her eyes and snuggled deeper into the covers.

Maybe she would find herself, whatever the outcome of the election, in neither place. Perhaps the end of her journey led to that third sought after nest. The bed in Indianapolis had always been warm. It had always been welcoming, too.