

FIONA STREET



by STEPHAN MICHAEL LOY

CHAPTER TWO

The Boeing 717 carried only nine passengers to Washington. It had seemed an extravagance at takeoff, but circumstances had changed since then. Now, the innocuous if over-large transport had become a de facto Air Force One. Crowds roared from behind police-monitored barriers as the plane taxied toward the terminal at National Airport, and television cameras and still photographers strained for the slightest glimpse of the news story hiding inside. Two limousines and two government sedans approached as the aircraft rolled to a stop. Secret Service agents poured from them and joined the police and federal marshals securing the tarmac. A gray-suited man and his female doppelgänger left the lead limousine and approached the mobile stairs just driven to the plane's open hatch. Both man and woman were stony-faced and erect, conscious of the nearby cameras but hiding their concern well. They waited grimly as the speaker of the House — the president-designate — appeared at the hatch above and waved to the crowd.

Irvine paused for the cameras before proceeding down the stairs at what he hoped was a confident pace. His wife followed after him, then his children, and finally the few staff members

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and military who had accompanied him to Florida. On the ground, Irvine met the two gray suits and took the man's extended hand.

"Senator Paxton, so glad to see you."

"Welcome back, Dan," the man said without joy. "I'm glad they found your family."

"I only wish we were here for happier reasons," the woman added. Her hand, taking Irvine's, trembled from age.

"Senator Thomason," Irvine returned, and paused before releasing her so the press could get a solid shot. It always paid for a Democratic president to make friendly with a Republican, even if she was just the Senate minority leader. "I must admit," Irvine said when he dropped her hand, "that you two look more like a war council than a congratulatory envoy."

Mrs. Irvine reached the ground with her children. The senators showered them with greetings, conscious to satisfy the cameras, then everyone turned toward the cars. Irvine escorted his family to the second limo in line, made a show of hugs, then backtracked to the main car, where the others waited. "We'll have to get Congress greased," he said as they ducked one by one into the limo. "We'll put together bills to stop this nonsense, get them through the pipe within a week."

"I don't know." The minority leader shook her head. She fumbled for a cigarette as soon as she sank into the limo's leather seat. "The man's high in the polls and he has his supporters, mostly those New Right idiots in the House. Those are your people, Daniel."

The doors closed and the bodyguards all found their rides. Irvine waited for the car to move before speaking. No one attempted to fill the silence.

"You're right," he told Thomason. "You Republicans could have warned us. You went through this with the Tea Party, remember? But that's all water under the bridge. We need to work together now. Only by working together can we get Truman under control."

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Senator Thomason worried her cigarette with a cheap Bic lighter. Her crossed legs fidgeted, knees bouncing from nervous energy or fear, Irvine couldn't tell which. "I don't know if we can cooperate," she said. "There's too much bad mojo."

"We've deeper concerns than people's hurt feelings—" Senator Paxton tried to say.

"Bullshit," she spat, then took a drag on her cigarette. "You started this. You built Truman up. You Democrats wanted to get our man, so you gave your special prosecutor near infinite power. Huh! Guess you didn't figure he'd turn on you, eh?"

"Truthfully?" Irvine slouched in his seat across from the lawmakers. "No, we didn't." He looked back and forth between the two. "Politics got us in this mess, and politics will get us out. But, it has to be a different brand of politics, or we're up Shit Creek."

"Just what did you have in mind?" Thomason asked. The senator's tone gave Irvine pause. Her previous vindictiveness had given way to something suddenly darker, heavier. The posturing was done; her true self showed through. Her true self felt utter resignation. Thomason was almost eighty. She would have retired years before if not for the polarization in Congress. She didn't want to retire, Irvine knew, and find her seat filled by yet another ideologue.

"We work together," Irvine finally said. "We work together, but not so obviously that somebody makes a legal challenge. We develop a bill reining in Truman's ungodly powers, a bill that will slip through both houses like a megadose of Ex-Lax. As president, I'll sign it, and we'll cap that son of a bitch before he destroys the republic."

"And then?" Paxton asked. "Then we accept culpability for this disaster? We admit to the people that our party caused the biggest constitutional crisis since the Civil War, and all out of partisan spite? Why not shoot ourselves as a grand finale?"

Everyone looked at him.

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“Well, come on, Dan. This isn’t a schoolyard fight. This is serious. We practically created a king here. This could be the end of our party—”

“—of your party,” Thomason corrected.

“God dammit, Abby, you’re missing the God damned point—”

“You’re both missing the point,” Irvine interrupted, then waited out the tension. Arguments collapsed. Feathers unruffled. Combatants settled back in their seats. “This isn’t a party crisis,” the president-to-be said into the quiet. “It’s a *national* crisis. Whether he knows it or not, Truman has the power to bring down this country. He can kill democracy as easily as he kills the careers of honest politicians. He’s a menace. His office is a menace. They killed it back in ‘99. I wish we’d left it that way.”

“There’ll be sacrifice,” Paxton added, “but if we work together, we can minimize the impact on either party. We’ll have to. We need everyone we can get to solve this problem, so we need guarantees of protection. Right, Abby?”

The Thomason nodded curtly. “I just wanted you to know where we start.” Her voice held distaste, but both men trusted her word.

“What did it?” Irvine asked. “What made the president resign?”

They knew the accusations, all of which were deniable, all hinged on germs of suspicion, third-hand stories, and the comments of base informants. Presidents had weathered such punishment before. Why surrender so early in the fight?

“The president was tired,” Paxton said simply, sounding tired himself. “He never wanted the job. He only wanted to serve his country.” No one laughed. A statement like that sounded corny only outside the government.

Irvine leaned toward him. “That’s so commendable. He’s a true patriot. Now, what made him quit?”

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“His kids,” the majority leader said, and sank back into his seat. “The president’s son is a Peace Corps volunteer. He’s done a lot of work in China.”

“Aww, shit...” Thomason groaned.

Paxton finished. “For an expert at innuendo, it isn’t hard to connect working in China to treason.”

“Oh, come on!” the minority leader yelled. “You can’t twist *that* hard. You can’t just make shit up and be taken seriously. I mean, just saying something—”

“—is as good as making it true,” Irvine finished for her. “Get real, Abby. That’s the way the dirty game is played. People have short attention spans. The press will eat anything, despite sanctimonious claims of editorial responsibility. You put out the libel, and the damage is done. By the time your truthfulness is questioned, you and the public are playing with something else. Too many of us play that game.”

“But, this is ridiculous, Daniel. He says just anything and gets away with it.”

“The man has an eighty-nine per cent approval rating. The president’s was somewhere near 15%, and ours are worse. It’s a reflection of how much distrust has grown between the people and their elected officials over the last several decades.”

“And, that’s Truman’s power,” Paxton said. “The people trust him. He who owns the people owns the truth. It’s the cosmology of our world. Sometimes it works for us, sometimes, as now, it doesn’t. Look at Ben Oxenburg, the INS chief. He’s the only man with balls to speak publicly against Truman. What’s he get? Investigated. Half the country is sure Oxenburg’s on the payroll of South American drug lords. You know it’s ridiculous. I know it’s ridiculous. Even Truman knows it’s ridiculous, but that doesn’t mean a thing. Oxenburg’s toast; he just doesn’t know it yet.”

“But, why?” Irvine asked of no one in particular. “What does Truman have against the president? Abby, you were there. Was he such a monster...”

“He was not,” the minority leader said.

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“Then the question remains...”

“The ISS,” Paxton said. “The president refused to release executive branch discretionary funds to create the ISS.”

Everyone watched him for several seconds. “Well?” Thomason asked with impatience.

“The ISS — the Internal Security Service — is Truman’s latest fevered dream. A law-enforcement arm of the special prosecutor’s office. Truman’s puppet attorney general begged for money to form the unit. The president refused, sure that the ISS would become Truman’s Gestapo.”

“What the hell’s he need a police force for?” the minority leader thundered. “He’s got the whole damned FBI, for God’s sake!”

“He doesn’t control the FBI, or the federal marshals.”

“So,” Irvine said, “the president denied him, so Truman destroyed the president.”

“That’s about it. You can bet the first thing your attorney general asks for is ISS authorization.”

“Who cares?” Irvine shrugged. “The first words out of my mouth after taking the oath of office will be to fire that sniveling bastard.”

“I wouldn’t recommend it,” Paxton said quickly. “You’ll provoke the special prosecutor.”

Everyone waited for Irvine’s response to that incredible statement. They all knew it was true. The general public did not know how dangerously close to extinction its democracy had grown. “Thanks for the warning,” the speaker finally said. “Maybe caution is called for.” He ran his hands through his short, tightly-curved hair. “As for the attorney general, maybe we’ll keep him on, as a conduit to the enemy. And I’ll approve that police force thing, on a limited basis. They won’t do Truman any good. We’ll stuff it with our own people. We’ll have his ass in a cage soon, and this is a constitutional government, after all. It doesn’t mix well with stormtroopers.”

“It’s frightening, really,” Paxton said, for the first time voicing the real fears of his colleagues. “Look what happened

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to the president, and the two men before him, and so many others. Destroyed by innuendo, by spin, by devious manipulation. Except for that bastard Kirby with his Chinese connections, they were essentially honest men, but still they went down. What about those of us who really have something to hide?"

They all considered the prospect, Irvine more deeply than anyone.



Reporters and cameramen jostled almost violently before the rostrum, intent on securing the best possible position for recording the prosecutor's victory announcement. They made the hotel lobby a terror, driving away the regular guests in their single-minded pursuit of history, truth, and a hot, salable story.

"Look at them," the Honorable Judge Jackson Truman said with undisguised disdain from the safety of a room off the lobby. Federal marshals kept the reporters a comfortable distance away. "Wild dogs, all of them. They get a whiff of a bone, and suddenly it's a junkyard fight. We trust the open exchange of ideas to these?"

He turned to Allen Benchley. The prosecutor's customary sharp regard did not frighten the clerk, but heightened his usual level of wariness. "That's the problem, Mr. Benchley. We pretend our country's run by saints while sons of bitches hold the keys. It's all self-interest. Those jackals out there have no interest at all in truth, or news, or the People's so-called Right to Know. They just want that big story, or their name in print, or their face on TV. Now, tell me if I'm wrong, why don't you?"

Benchley didn't dare. He had clerked for the judge for three years, since before the present craziness began, and he had learned circumspection in that time. Benchley was nothing, and he knew it. He was thin, clumsy, and almost blind behind wire-rimmed glasses. He was also the only one in the room

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without a lit cigar in his hand. Three assistant counsels stood with Truman, all expensive suits and projected confidence, but the judge only addressed his clerk.

Benchley adjusted his glasses. He was still unused to the world of Jackson Truman. The reporters and the fame — and infamy — they nurtured were so outside his middle class, Midwestern upbringing. It bothered him to live as the Judge's sounding board when other, more eminent men constantly stood around. "I reckon you're right, sir," he said after brief consideration. It usually paid to agree with the judge.

"Damned right I'm right. And it doesn't stop there. That's why we have jobs, y'know. Corrupt newsmen feeding on corrupt politicians, all jockeying at the public feed trough, all taking something from Mr. Joe American. Take that son of a bitch in the White House, making on like the victim because we call him to pay for his crimes. What did he think, he could trim pork with impunity back in his congressional days? That he could give away our national security through those satellite and computer deals with the Chinese? That his snot-nosed liberal kid could do the same, just because he's unofficial? I tell you, it pisses me off what's happened to ethics these days. The Chinese, the Japanese, the Russians, they can easily have this country with a big enough suitcase of money. Plenty of eager salesmen to close the deal. Sons of bitches, young man. Everybody's driven by petty self-interest. Everybody sees his own hunk of pie, to hell with his neighbor. Even you, Mr. Benchley. What do you think of that?" He puffed his cigar.

"Me, sir? I'm just here to serve. I could've gone into practice long before now."

Truman grinned, but the expression held only acid. Much like his namesake, he was not a large man, but ferocious. His gray hair lay thin but neat on his skull, and he wore his trademark black suit brightened only by a stark red tie. He was easily dismissible except for the predatory eyes and the hard jaw, both unused to compromise. Truman was a beast in an unassuming guise, always on the hunt. Benchley didn't like

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being challenged by the judge. It made him feel like the man's next meal. "So you say, Mr. Benchley, but I know you love the fame of clerking for the special prosecutor. What son of a bitch wouldn't? And, I know the book and movie offers keep rolling in. And, I suspect, the girls just drop for a man in your position, now don't they? You get laid pretty often, Mr. Benchley?"

Benchley tried not to blush, but the Judge spoke truth, especially that last part.

Truman laughed in triumph. "Sons of bitches!" he crowed. "Sons of bitches, all!"

"Well, sir," Benchley offered, clearing his throat. "Surely, not everyone is a son of a bitch, as you put it. If they were, wouldn't that make you a son of a bitch, too?"

Truman eyed him with sharp interest. The judge readily admitted that his was a vanity of immense proportions, but he sometimes forgot that dangerous fact, and Benchley was there to save him with a gentle sting of reminder. Now Truman chuckled as he chewed his cigar, an unpleasant, cunning sound. "No, Mr. Benchley, I'm no son of a bitch. No, sir. I'm the bastard who knocked the bitch up!"

Everyone laughed politely. Smoke billowed to the ceiling. "Well," Truman announced, "it's time to feed the dogs. But first, a few notes. Take this down, Mr. Benchley."

Benchley jostled his yellow notepad. "Yes, sir. Ready."

"Get everything we can on majority whip William Taylor. That peckerhead's gonna be speaker of the House if Irvine has any say. I also want the file reopened on Irvine himself. He seems like a straight-up fella, and that's always made me nervous. No room in this game for an honest politician."

"Sir," one of the lawyers bravely interrupted, "haven't you already investigated Irvine? We didn't find anything then."

"Absolutely right, but he wasn't president then. I want creativity this time around, as creative as we got with the last two, if that's what it takes."

"Under what authority, sir? How can we justify—"

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“Under *my* authority, dammit! By God, this is no game. We’re in a struggle for the survival of this republic. Criminals in the streets, unions out of control, environmentalists and cultists and druggies and AIDS, and all the fault of our God damned so-called government. We need vigilance here, not waffling. We need to keep the peckerheads under control.”

Faces avoided his, glancing with embarrassment at the floor and ceiling.

“Well, hell,” Truman complained. “I didn’t say we’d use everything we find in evidence, but you never know what might be handy out of court.”

Incredibly, the qualification met mumbled approval. This bothered Benchley. As so many times before, no one questioned the judge’s intent, only the problems of practical execution. Never mind the illegality of evidentiary “fishing trips,” or that blackmail and its cousins were felonious activities. Truman’s lawyers considered the law only so far as it furthered the Judge’s goals. They were crusaders, after all, fighting to cut out the cancer from American politics, to save what they saw as a terminal society. Truman had taught them this. Charisma had fortified the teaching. Like the crusaders before them, Truman’s people were blind to the harm they did their own beliefs. Just as the Crusades of the last millennium had mocked the ideals of Christianity with their wars and willful atrocities, the crusaders of the special prosecutor threatened to destroy the free society they claimed to defend. Any staff members who did not embrace Truman’s *jihad* mentality had long since left the fold. The special prosecutor’s office was ideologically pure, or so he liked to think.

“Get Duran on Irvine,” Truman said as he stubbed out his cigar. “The slimy son of a bitch, he’ll find anything worth finding in the speaker’s dark closets.”

Benchley scribbled a note.

“And Oxenburg,” Truman said almost as an afterthought. “I want to know where we stand on that bastard. I am sick of his squeaky door voice.”

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“Yes, sir,” Benchley nodded, and bent to his pad again.



The mob had almost calmed when Truman made his entrance. Then chaos erupted again in the form of shouted questions, glaring strobes, and the frenetic whine of high-speed cameras. Truman looked grim. He pushed to the rostrum as the marshals cleared his path. He wasted no time on preambles.

“The president of the United States resigned his office in disgrace today, and rightly so. We are not gladdened by this event; there are no victory dances in my office. However, justice walks with us. We will continue our work until all criminals of the state are identified and prosecuted. The American people have assigned me this task, and I will not shirk from it. Questions.”

A flurry of hands and exclamations. “Mr. Truman, will you continue your investigation of the president now that he has resigned?”

“Where I come from, we don’t let criminals off because they don’t want to play anymore. Justice doesn’t care what office he holds, if any. We’re after the man, not the title.”

“INS Commissioner Oxenburg contends that you’re on your way to a bloodless coup, the dismantling of democracy in America. How do you answer such charges?”

“I don’t. I don’t answer to fat pundits, over-imaginative editors, or stooges of the criminal left. I work for the American people, and their mandate against corruption is clear.”

“Isn’t it true that most of your success is due to intimidation and blackmail rather than sound investigative procedures?”

Truman met the questioner with a hard stare. “I’m sorry,” he said, his tone betraying no emotion, “I must have been unclear. Intelligent questions only, please.” He turned from the rostrum. “Thank you, gentlemen, I’ve nothing more to say.”

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His people moved to surround him. He retreated within his blocking force of marshals until the press was left behind.

“I want that bastard’s ID,” Truman said as they approached the elevators. “Son of a bitch must pay, insulting me like that.”

Benchley scribbled a note and assigned it a priority.



“Thanks a bunch, Mike,” a print journalist said to the final questioner. “You kept me from getting my bit.”

The other man shrugged. He ignored the dirty looks and murmured insults, and made for the street with everyone else. Intelligent questions only, he thought. Now, where had he heard that before?