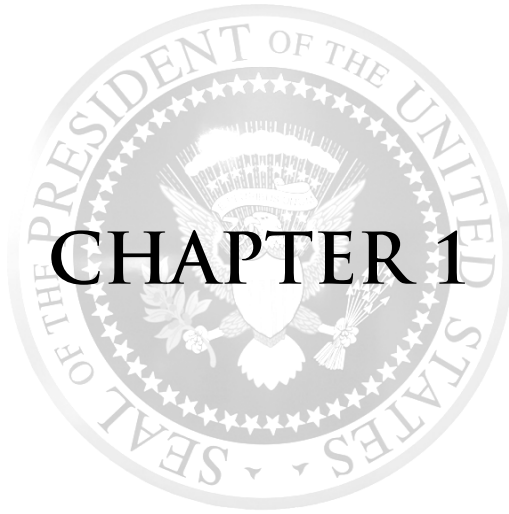


THE PRESIDENT'S  
HENCHMAN

JOSEPH FLYNN





WHEN MCGILL was formally introduced to the White House press corps, Helen Thomas asked him how it felt to be the country's first First Gentleman.

He responded, "I prefer to think of myself as the president's henchman."

The line got a good laugh from the newsies; even Press Secretary Aggie Wu grinned. But Chief of Staff Galia Mindel reacted to the remark with a mighty frown. McGill saw the look of disapproval but didn't worry. He didn't work for her.

Just wait until Galia learned he'd gotten his P.I. license.

And his concealed weapons permit.

She'd be about as thrilled as the Secret Service had been. They'd changed his code name from Valentine to Holmes, which McGill had laughed at, and, on the whole, considered an improvement.

Galia wasn't likely to crack wise, though. She'd try to fight him. And lose.

McGill's career choice came with a presidential stamp of approval.

"What exactly does the president's henchman do?" Candy Crowley inquired.

"Things nobody else can," McGill told her with a twinkle in his eye.

Galia didn't like that answer either.

JAMES JACKSON McGill became a minor historical figure when his wife, Congresswoman Patricia Darden Grant (R-IL), became a major historical figure by becoming the first woman to be elected president of the United States. McGill had worked as the de facto head of security for Patti's presidential campaign. Before that, he'd been a Chicago cop for twenty years, and the chief of police for five years in the posh North Shore suburb of Winnetka, Illinois.

It was in this latter capacity that McGill met the future president. He solved the murder of her first husband, philanthropist Andrew Hudson Grant. Cracked the case in twelve hours, which was why the president-elect couldn't argue with McGill when he told her the week before her inauguration that he was going to have to find something to do while she was busy running the country. He wasn't ready to go fishing or spend all his time cutting ribbons.

"You still want to be a cop, don't you?" Patti asked.

"Yeah."

"But I know you don't like any of the federal agencies. So, you don't want me to appoint you to run, say, the FBI."

"No."

"Do you want to stay in Illinois? Have a commuter relationship?"

McGill shook his head. Firmly.

"So what does that leave?"

"Private license," he said.

Patricia Darden Grant was a very smart woman. She processed information like a supercomputer. But that one stopped her cold—long enough to make her laugh, anyway.

"You ... you want to be the private eye who lives in the White House?"

McGill said, "Why not? You're the only one who gets to break tradition?"

What could she say to that? Only: "You'll be careful, Jim?"

"Sure," McGill said. "Won't do a thing to embarrass you."

"I wasn't talking about politics. I can always get another job. But I don't want to bury another husband."

McGill kissed the most powerful woman in the world, loving her more than ever, and did his best to reassure her he would be around for a long, long time.

MCGILL ABSOLUTELY refused to have more than one Secret Service agent assigned to guard him. The head of the White House Security Detail was an unsmiling humanoid named Celsus Crogher. Although Crogher was only in his late forties, his gray hair was turning white. His eyes were the color of silicon; his skin was slate. It was as if all pigment had been pruned from his family tree. Crogher wanted McGill's protection closer to platoon strength. The president brokered a compromise: McGill would have one Secret Service bodyguard and an armed driver from the White House Transportation Agency.

McGill interviewed several men and women for each position; and in the end, he picked Secret Service Special Agent Donald "Deke" Ky. The son of a Eurasian Vietnamese American mother and an African American GI father, Deke had tightly waved black hair, blue eyes behind epicanthic folds and skin the color of a new penny. Leo Levy was a self-described good ol' Jewish boy from North Carolina. Long and lanky, with a face out of the Levant and an accent out of Andy Griffith, he'd driven the NASCAR circuit before getting into government work.

Both men had exemplary records, and each took a solemn pledge never to rat out McGill for anything he said or did. Celsus Crogher and Galia Mindel were not to be privy to any of the doings of McGill Investigations, Inc. Beyond that, Deke and Leo were to let McGill know if they detected any government busybodies snooping on him.

STARTING IN February, just after Patti's inauguration, McGill walked all over Washington, D.C., like a rookie cop learning his new beat. Before meeting Patti, he'd visited the city only once, as part of an American Studies course at Saint Ignatius College Prep. Deke Ky walked between McGill and the street. Leo Levy idled along in a supercharged and armored black Chevy sedan a half block behind.

As often as not, McGill went unnoticed. When people did recognize him, they usually just smiled and called out hello. The exceptions were the elderly and the kids. Both groups wanted to talk with him, not infrequently from a distance of a few inches.

The kids' questions were easy to answer.

Did he think the president was pretty? Gorgeous.

What sports teams did he like? The DePaul Blue Demons.

Had Michael Jordan played better in Chicago or Washington? Chicago.

Was he going to be president, too, someday? No. One president per family was enough.

The elderly had more serious matters in mind: war and peace, the economy, the environment, crime, immigration. Almost without exception they would rest a hand lightly on his arm as they spoke.

When an opinion was called for, McGill did not bob and weave. His answers were sincere and plainspoken, but he did preface whatever he had to say with: "Please understand, this is just my opinion, and I'd appreciate it if it stays between us."

Nobody went running to the newspapers with McGill's words of wisdom.

Quite often, the old folks also asked for his help. With Social Security. Medicare. The Veterans Administration. At first, McGill didn't know how to help. So he took people's names and phone numbers and promised to get back to them. Soon, though, Deke carried with him a BlackBerry that stored the names and direct phone numbers of every top administrator in the federal and district governments. McGill passed them along to those in need of assistance.

And added, "Tell them Mr. McGill said you should call."

Hoping he had the clout people imagined he did.

It turned out he did, and that was how his walking tours became news. Someone let it be known how helpful he'd been. Soon it became impossible for him to go out without a media horde at his heels and a throng of supplicants in front of him. No good deed went unpunished.

He had to start traveling in the back of Leo's Chevy.

BY THE time the cherry blossoms appeared, he knew his way around town, at least a little. And he found office space to rent on P Street just above the Rock Creek Parkway. The building was a rehabbed three-story ivory-brick structure. It housed a commercial recording studio, A-Sharp Sound, on the first floor, and a small accounting firm, Wentworth and Willoughby, on the second. W&W actually moved down one floor to accommodate McGill Investigations, Inc. The Secret Service explained that in the event of an emergency Mr. McGill might have to be evacuated from the roof of the building by helicopter.

McGill apologized to the other tenants for all the bother he'd caused—which included the feds investigating every employee of both existing businesses back to infancy to see if he or she might be a threat to McGill's life—and compensated his new neighbors with tickets to a Redskins game or a Kennedy Center performance, per their preference.

ON THE morning in May when McGill arrived for his first day of work, there was a line down the hall. By ten o'clock, the queue ran down the staircase to the ground floor and out the front entrance. The building's owner, an astute Armenian immigrant named Dikran Missirian, quickly rented several café tables complete with Cinzano umbrellas. He provided complimentary sparkling mineral water and gourmet coffee to the waiting crowd.

Business cards were exchanged all around.

Dikki made several valuable business contacts that day.

McGill netted not a single client.

Without exception, the ladies and gentlemen waiting to see him were lobbyists. Sugar, sorghum, and sweet corn were among the foodstuffs they represented. Trucks, trains, and planes were just a few of their preferred modes of transportation. Albania, Algeria, and Angola were but the beginning of the countries whose interests they advanced.

None of them had a criminal matter or even a straying spouse to investigate.

All of them offered retainers, six to seven figures per annum, in the event they might someday need professional investigative services. McGill politely listened to each of them and respectfully turned down all of them.

He explained that he worked cases. Couldn't take money on the mere possibility that something might come up.

Didn't say he'd never sell access to his wife, the president, but everybody seemed to understand. Most of them were gracious about being rejected. They'd given it the old college try and were happy just to meet him and shake his hand.

A couple of type-A personalities, however, wouldn't take no for an answer, until Deke Ky quickly put a whispered word into their ears. Both hard chargers abruptly turned pale and left the office on wobbly legs.

McGill appreciated Deke's concern but didn't feel that prospective

clients, no matter how rude, should be threatened with either lengthy incarceration or swift death. He needed someone to run interference for him—someone who could discourage the jerks with nothing more than a hard stare. So he got on the phone to Chicago.

“Sweetie? It’s Jim. If you’re not busy, I’ve got a job for you.”

MARGARET “SWEETIE” Sweeney had been McGill’s strong right arm on the force in both Chicago and Winnetka. She’d even taken a bullet that rightfully should have been McGill’s. A rich suburban punk had kidnapped his ex-girlfriend and locked the two of them in his bedroom. Things got to the point where murder-suicide looked imminent. McGill’s plan had been to break down the door on the count of three. Sweetie went on two.

“So I’m gonna be what around here?” Sweetie asked when she arrived the day after McGill called. “The office manager, the dragon lady, the anchor on your more outlandish impulses?”

“My partner,” McGill said. “The bad cop to my good cop. Same as always.”

Sweetie noticed Deke looking at her. She knew right away McGill had told him about her. Now, the Secret Service hero was wondering: Could *he* really take a bullet for someone?

“Only one way to find out,” Sweetie answered the unspoken question.

Deke pretended he didn’t know what she was talking about.

“Patti says to come by for dinner tonight,” McGill told her.

The president had a special place in her heart for Sweetie after learning what she’d done to spare McGill. And, of course, the grief Sweetie had later saved her from personally.

Sweetie smiled, and McGill thought, as he always did, that she looked like St. Michael the Archangel ... or a Valkyrie, if you preferred Norse mythology.

“Yeah, I’d like to see her, too,” Sweetie said. “Did she get my birthday card?”

“Made her day,” McGill answered truthfully.

The card had been addressed to Mrs. James J. McGill, 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

The seal of the President of the United States is centered in the background, rendered in a light gray, semi-transparent style. It features an eagle with wings spread, holding an olive branch and arrows, with a shield on its chest. The words "SEAL OF THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES" are inscribed around the perimeter of the seal.

## CHAPTER 2

### MONDAY

FOR THE next four weeks, with Sweetie stationed in the outer office like a desk sergeant, not a single lobbyist pestered McGill. Neither did anyone else. Word had gotten around official Washington: The president's henchman was not a back door to the Oval Office. And the Metro Police seemed to have a mortal lock on all local criminal investigations.

It was beginning to look like McGill would have plenty of time for ribbon cuttings. Galia Mindel had sent him a request to provide a recipe for his favorite dish—to be included in a new edition of *The First Ladies' Cookbook*.

Things were so slow that first Monday in June that Deke and Sweetie, who'd received her own concealed weapons permit, had gone to a firing range at lunchtime to shoot it out for the office deadeye championship. Leo, parked out front, had been left to hold down the fort.

Apparently, Leo let Chana Lochlan slip past him. More likely, he decided she wasn't a threat and got her autograph.

McGill was eating a turkey sandwich at his desk and reading the *Chicago Tribune's* sports section online when "the most fabulous face on television," as judged by *People* magazine, knocked on his open door. "Mr. McGill, may I come in?"

The first thing that struck McGill was her size. With only moderate heels on her shoes, she had to be six feet tall. She was whipcord lean and even in her business suit gave the impression she was ready to compete in a triathlon. Then there was that fabulous face—a proud nose, a generous mouth, a defiant chin, and shoulder-length black hair framing big hazel eyes.

McGill swallowed the food he'd been chewing and gestured her to a guest chair. He knew who she was, of course. He'd even glimpsed her in person a time or two. Chana Lochlan was the White House reporter for the World Wide News (W<sup>2</sup>N) cable network. Her job was to cover McGill's wife. In an honest and forthright way, if you believed in ad slogans.

To stick a knife in at every opportunity, as McGill saw it.

"Would you mind if we closed the door?" Ms. Lochlan asked.

McGill studied her as though she were a painting. It was a pretty darn nice face. All the more so for the first few faint lines that TV makeup usually covered. Still, it wasn't quite in Patti's league. But then the president had prepared for a career in politics by working as a model and acting in Hollywood movies. That and graduating from Yale with honors, building houses with Jimmy Carter and Habitat for Humanity, and doing innumerable other hands-on good works.

Chana Lochlan probably had a long list of virtuous deeds on her résumé, too, but McGill knew that wasn't what people would talk about if they learned she'd been in his office with the door closed.

"We're the only ones here, Ms. Lochlan. No need to close the door. If you've come to ask about an interview, there's someone at the White House who handles those requests for me ... I think."

"I didn't come for an interview."

McGill blinked. Chana Lochlan was going to be his first client?

"You know, it's true what they say about you," she said.

"What's that?"

"You do look a little like Harrison Ford before he went gray."

"I used to say more like Rory Calhoun, but nobody seems to remember him anymore. Ms. Lochlan, are you here to talk about hiring me as an investigator?"

She looked over her shoulder at the entrance to the office suite.

McGill glanced at the time on his computer monitor. "We'll have fifteen minutes to ourselves if you have something to say."

"You're not going to close the door?"

McGill shook his head.

"You're a very careful man."

McGill waited. She'd talk or she'd leave.

"A question or two first," she said. "Does what I tell you stay with you? Or does it reach the president? I cover her, as I'm sure you know. I ask her hard questions. Maybe you even think some of them are politically motivated."

McGill kept himself from nodding.

"But doing my job would be very difficult if the president knew what I had to tell you."

McGill hadn't considered the question before, but he thought it fair.

He said, "The president and I don't keep secrets from one another—about our personal lives. But she doesn't tell me if she's going to have the Marines seize Lichtenstein. So it seems reasonable I should keep the details of my investigations from her."

"Then I can expect confidentiality?"

"Yes." A thought occurred to McGill. "I might, however, consult with my colleague in the firm." *Might*. As if Sweetie would stand for his keeping secrets. "She'd be bound by the same obligation to confidentiality I would."

That was agreeable to Chana Lochlan, though she took one more look over her shoulder.

"Two days ago, at my home in Georgetown, I was awakened by a phone call at 4:00 A.M. I picked up the phone and mumbled hello. The caller was a man. His voice sounded white, educated, Midwestern American. At a guess, he was thirty to fifty. He began by asking me a question. He said, 'Do you remember the last time we made love?'"

McGill picked up a pen, opened a notepad. "Is your home phone number unlisted?"

Chana nodded.

"Is it on your business card?"

She shook her head.

“Have you ever given it to a source?”

“I made that mistake once, early in my career. But that was in New York.”

“And this man didn’t sound like that one?”

“Not at all. If I hadn’t been uncertain I’d heard the question right, I’d have hung up before the caller could go on. As it was, I heard him say, ‘Come on, Gracie, you remember.’”

McGill understood the significance of the remark.

“Chana is a Hebrew name meaning graceful. Graceful. Gracie.”

The newswoman raised her perfect eyebrows.

“My first wife and I have two daughters and a son,” McGill said.

“I know. I read your bio before coming here. But your girls are named Abigail and Caitlin. Your son is named Kenneth.”

“Abigail is also a Hebrew name. Meaning: gives joy. When Carolyn was pregnant with Abbie, we bought the best naming book we could find. Three kids later, names and their meanings got to be a hobby of mine. Anyway, your caller knew a nickname of yours. A private one?”

“Only my dad and my ex used it. I can’t remember anyone else calling me that.”

Some questions could be asked and answered without a word being spoken. Had the caller been her father? Chana Lochlan’s look said don’t even think about it.

“And it wasn’t your former husband on the phone?” McGill inquired.

She shook her head. “Michael died on his honeymoon with his second wife. Hang gliding in Hawaii.”

“So some unknown male knows your unlisted phone number, calls you at home, also knows a private nickname, and intimates he was once your lover.”

“Intimates authoritatively,” Chana said. She took yet another look over her shoulder. They were still alone, but when she resumed speaking, her voice dropped to a whisper. “He took me through a reminiscence of love-making. He knows what I like. Knows in such detail that mere guesswork can be ruled out. He also knows ...”

She stopped to look at the notes McGill was making. He tried to alleviate her discomfort. “Tell me only what you need to. If I have questions ... I’ll try to be delicate.”

Chana Lochlan steeled herself and continued. "He knows my body: moles, freckles, birthmarks. Things I need two mirrors to see."

"Did you get the feeling he was working himself up?"

"No. His voice was very gentle. Loving, even. When he finished, he made this little kissing sound and told me to go back to sleep. Amazingly enough, I did ... and I dreamed of the lovemaking he'd just described. I could see his body but not his face."

McGill thought in silence for a moment. He looked at Chana Lochlan's eyes. Fear made flecks of yellow burn bright in the hazel irises.

"You think he's coming for you, whoever he is," McGill said.

"Yes, I do."

"I do investigative work not protection."

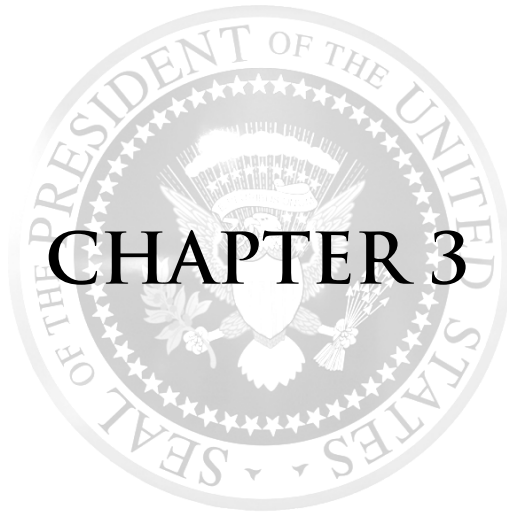
"And I work in the public eye, Mr. McGill. The minute I hire a bodyguard, *I* become a story, and that's not what I want. I hope you can find this man and stop him from doing ..."

"Whatever he has in mind."

"Yes."

McGill took the case. Chana Lochlan was gone before Sweetie and Deke came back. It was only when Sweetie asked if he'd had any calls while they were out that McGill remembered he was now a businessman and no longer a cop. He'd completely forgotten to discuss money with his first client.

Somehow, it had slipped her mind, too.



## CHAPTER 3

### TUESDAY

THE PRESIDENT'S day began at 4:30 A.M. She leaned over and kissed McGill, who enjoyed the privilege of sleeping in till six o'clock. Her husband also enjoyed his morning kiss, not simply lying there and accepting it but putting his arms around her and kissing back. Sometimes, when McGill held on, and the affairs of state allowed, the president didn't get out of bed until 4:45.

Patti Grant was used to getting up at hours most people would consider ungodly. She'd done it as both a model and an actress. Rising for sunrise shoots on tropical beaches. Appearing on sets for early calls. Even when she'd been married to Andy Grant and could have slept as late as she liked, she was unable to linger in bed. If the weather was fair, she loved to watch the sun rise out of Lake Michigan. If things were gloomy outside, she'd get up early anyway, relishing the feeling that she was getting a jump on everyone else.

Not a bad attitude for a woman in her position to have.

McGill was asleep again by the time she stepped into her bathroom. She examined herself nude in a full-length mirror. The presidency was yet another of her jobs where appearance mattered. Her dark brown hair had yet to show any gray, but it was no longer shoulder length. It had been cut to a bob, short enough to require minimal care, not so short that anyone

could accuse her of trying to appear mannish.

Now there was an idea that would make McGill laugh.

She was still slender and well toned, but she was twenty pounds heavier than when she'd made her living appearing before cameras. Back then she thought she'd looked like a pencil with an expensive hairdo. She figured she could add another ten to fifteen pounds over a two-term presidency and still look good.

When she finally left the public eye, she could imagine letting her hair grow long as it turned white. She'd cherish her smile lines and crow's-feet. And she'd kiss her husband's bald spot if he had the grace to have one by then. Life would be good.

She was looking forward to growing old with McGill.

She pulled on a tank-style swimsuit and a terry cloth robe and walked barefoot to the White House swimming pool. She swam laps for twenty minutes, doing neat kick turns, maintaining an aerobic pace, not going so fast she couldn't review the events of the previous day.

Next came twenty minutes of strength training: dumbbells and exercise machines. During her workout, she listened to intelligence briefings from the CIA and FBI through the ear buds of her iPod. The highlights provided by the spooks and G-men were supplemented by briefing books if she thought any item demanded her in-depth attention.

Finally, she did twenty minutes of tai chi to align her energy along the proper paths and give herself flexibility and peace of mind. This was the time when she often had insights about how to address the dangers that the government's watchdogs had alerted her to moments earlier.

For political problems, she had her own shrewd instincts.

And Galia Mindel.

GALIA WAS fifty-six years old. As the president had been, she was a widow. Unlike the president, her husband had been taken by illness not murder. A New Yorker to her roots, Galia had a PhD from Columbia in Modern Political Thought. She was handsome in the fashion of a headmistress at a no-nonsense girls' school. Only five-foot-four, she wore her hair up and her heels high to give an impression of height. Her girth was all her own. Image-conscious, she worked hard to keep her weight in check; the struggle was ongoing and intense.

Galia looked up from a note she was making on the pad resting on her lap. Her eyes were drawn to the picture of McGill that sat in a silver frame on the president's credenza in the Oval Office. Rory Calhoun, she thought. McGill was right about that. She was old enough to remember the actor. Handsome, smiling, manly ... nothing but trouble when reincarnated as James J. McGill.

The president's henchman, indeed. That was *her* job.

"Galia," the president said, addressing her a second time.

The chief of staff snapped to. "Yes, Madam President."

"The note I received from you at breakfast asked if I could be at my desk ten minutes early." The president gestured: Here I am.

Galia wondered if McGill had informed the president that he'd acquired his first client. Or who that client was. To the president, she said, "You'll remember, ma'am, we agreed that you, more than any previous president, could expect a series of challenges early in your administration."

"I remember," the president said evenly. "And now one has come up?"

"It has."

"Foreign or domestic?"

"Domestic. The Pentagon."

The president waited for the other shoe to drop.

"The Pentagon," Galia repeated, "and Senator Michaelson."

THE ELECTION of Patricia Darden Grant to the presidency had done more than end over two hundred years of the exclusively male hold on the office; it had caused a tectonic shift in American politics. The new president was a Republican, but a *moderate* Republican. Some went so far as to say a RINO. Republican in name only.

She was fiscally conservative, but socially ... hard to pin down.

She believed that the Second Amendment provided for the right to bear arms, but not the right to bear arms *secretly*. As she saw it, the government had a legitimate interest in seeing to it that all firearms were registered, their owners were identified, and a federal database of the distinct markings each weapon left on its projectiles was established.

She believed that every American came with a full menu of legal rights, irrespective of sexual orientation. Gays and lesbians, she said, should be allowed to serve openly in the military. *However*, every American also had

the right to be free from unwanted sexual attention. So gays and lesbians would have to serve in capacities that didn't require them to live in communal settings.

She believed in reproductive choice, but insisted that in the absence of a medical emergency or other extraordinary circumstance, a woman who carried a pregnancy past the first trimester had *made* her choice and no termination past that point should be allowed.

The conventional wisdom had it that such political heterodoxy should have made it impossible for Patti Grant to win the Republican primaries in which conservative activists were said to hold all the cards. But then the conventional wisdom also held that a woman never could win because a woman never had won.

Patti trumped the traditional thinkers on three counts.

The first was an outpouring of sympathy and admiration for her. Her first husband, Andy Grant, had been killed by radical antiabortionists who had tried to coerce Patti into voting their way on the Support of Motherhood Act, a piece of legislation that would have provided government-paid medical care and a guaranteed adoption for the children of those victims of rape and incest who chose to carry their pregnancies to term.

Patti's position was that any woman who'd suffered a trauma as horrifying and invasive as rape or incest should not be pressured by anybody, especially not the government, to perpetuate her pain for nine months. Beyond that, the adoption guarantor noted in the bill was the Salvation's Path Church of Richmond, Virginia. The separation of church and state would have to be thrown out the window for the bill to stand.

Even so, Congresswoman Grant suggested that the Salvation's Path Church and other like-minded organizations had conceived a worthwhile alternative to abortion, *if* it was offered privately and in a spirit of compassion to those victims of crime who would find it a comfort rather than a second assault.

That wasn't nearly good enough for the forces pushing the bill. They *wanted* the Support of Motherhood Act to be challenged. Given the cast of characters sitting on the Supreme Court, they thought they could persuade or bully five votes for their side. Demolishing the separation between church and state was *exactly* what they had in mind. Then they could really start in on making their agenda the law of the land.

And they identified Congresswoman Patricia Darden Grant as the linch-pin vote they had to have. A Republican, but a moderate, she'd worked closely with legislators on both sides of the aisle in the House and in the Senate. A politician and a former movie star, who'd never known scandal in either Washington or Hollywood, the two great cesspools of American public life, she was both well-known and widely admired. Put her pretty face at the front of a crowd supporting the bill, and it couldn't lose.

Only Patti wouldn't play ball. So Andy got a threatening message. *Get your wife to vote the right way. Do it, or she'll know what it's like to see the taking of an innocent life.* And in the end that was just what happened.

But Patti hadn't given in, and McGill had caught Andy's killers.

AS A profile in courage, nobody else in the Republican primary field came close. Voters who might have had questions on the issues gave Patti the benefit of the doubt because of her strength of character.

Then there was the strength of her presentation. In the primary debates, she was just plain smarter than anyone else on the stage, and it showed. A trained actor, she delivered her lines with an eloquence, a sense of timing, and a range of emotions that left the other candidates looking like cardboard cutouts.

Finally, a large part of the electorate, male and female, simply fell in love with Patti. It wasn't the kind of thing most voters would ever admit to pollsters, but it warmed their hearts to cast a ballot for her. Here and there, however, an occasional woman would confess that it was wonderfully romantic that the congresswoman had married McGill. You looked at that, they said, and you could believe that good could still triumph over evil.

In the general election, Patti and her running mate, Governor Mather Wyman of Ohio, were the all-but-unanimous choice of Republican voters; the conservatives had nowhere else to go if they hoped to have any influence. She carried independents four to one. Even a third of the Democratic vote went her way.

Given a mandate, she promised to govern from the center and work in a bipartisan fashion whenever possible. Which, of course, pissed off the left and the right no end. Both extremes claimed that the new president would blur party identities.

What really scared them, of course, was that she would start her own

centrist party. Make it the first new major political party since the early nineteenth century, leaving them at the margins, consigned to purgatory if not hell.

So the new president, while hugely popular, was not without her share of enemies.

Or challenges.

Like the one from the Pentagon that Galia was telling her about.

“HER NAME is Carina Linberg,” Galia informed the president. “She’s a colonel in the Air Force. Works in military intelligence at the Pentagon. Until yesterday, it looked like she’d be the youngest woman in that branch of the service ever to become a general.”

Patti knew a cue when she heard one. “And now?”

“Now she’s being investigated to see if she should be brought before a court-martial.” Galia gave it a beat. She had a sense of timing, too. “For adultery.”

That stirred the president’s memory. “Wasn’t there another case like this some years back? Another woman in the Air Force. A bomber pilot, I think.”

Galia nodded. As usual, she had the facts at her fingertips. “Lieutenant Allison Neely. In that case, however, Lieutenant Neely had two lovers. One was a married civilian employee of the Air Force and the other was an Air Force enlisted man. Lieutenant Neely was ordered by her base commander to stop seeing both men. She didn’t. So the charges against her also included refusal to obey an order and fraternization with enlisted personnel.”

The president nodded. “Now, I remember. It was those charges the military said were most important. Lieutenant Neely’s conduct was detrimental to the good order and discipline of the service ... and at the time I agreed with them.”

“Much to the displeasure of NOW and other feminists,” Galia reminded her.

The president shrugged. Any political decision was bound to anger someone.

“So how is this case different?” she asked.

“Colonel Linberg was sleeping with a Navy man. Captain Dexter Co-

wan. Her naval counterpart in military intelligence. She claims he told her he was divorced. He says he told her he was separated from his wife, but that he and Mrs. Cowan were talking about a possible reconciliation. Both sides agree that Captain Cowan didn't wear a wedding ring to work."

"So there are no other charges against Colonel Linberg? The military can't say the adultery is incidental to more serious infractions?"

"No, Madam President. Adultery is the sole charge."

"How often does that happen?"

Galia flipped a page in her notebook. "There were sixty-six cases in the Air Force last year that included adultery charges. Sixty-five of them also included other serious charges."

The president sat back in her chair. "The exception was another woman?"

"A man."

"Even so. It looks like this is a handy charge to trot out when you want to ruin someone's career."

"Including yours," Galia said, closing her notebook.

"Hence the mention of Roger Michaelson."

"Exactly. The junior senator from Oregon has an abiding hatred for you."

Patti Grant wasn't about to argue that point.

Galia continued, "There is absolutely no reason why the Air Force couldn't resolve the Colonel Linberg matter administratively; that would be the most common way to dispose of it. If it wasn't dropped entirely as an un-provable he-said, she-said case."

The president's mind leaped ahead. "If I side with Colonel Linberg, the Pentagon will think I'm a meddling woman who never wore a uniform. Someone not fit to be commander in chief."

"And your loose Hollywood morals will finally be revealed."

"But if I side with the military, I'll be fair game for millions of women, and not just movement feminists. I'll be destroying the career of a talented woman for an offense that's based on one man's word. An offense that would never even be prosecuted in a civilian court."

"Yes, but if a court-martial finds Colonel Linberg guilty of adultery, she could end up serving prison time at Fort Leavenworth."

"Either way, my administration could be crippled at the outset." The president nodded to herself. "You're right, Galia. This is worthy of Roger

Michaelson. Is there any proof he's actually involved?"

"Other than his seat on the Senate Armed Services Committee? Not yet."

"And who do you have waiting outside to see me?" The president wasn't just making a good guess; she knew Galia Mindel.

"The Air Force chief of staff, General Altman."

"Fine, I'll have a cup of coffee with him. But who will do the actual investigation on this case?"

Galia bit her lip. "That would be someone from the Air Force's Office of Special Investigations."

"Find out who that someone is," the president instructed. "Have his service record on my desk in an hour; have him ready to see me in ninety minutes."

LIEUTENANT WELBORN Yates was twenty-four years old. He had blonde hair, blue eyes, and pink cheeks. A trim five-ten with good shoulders, he could have been a poster boy for the Air Force, not one of its criminal investigators. His arrival at the Oval Office was punctual to the second. Saluting and standing at attention, he looked so young to the president she felt she must already be wizened and white-haired. It took Galia's clearing her throat to bring Patti out of her reverie.

"At ease, Lieutenant," the president said. "Please take a seat."

"Yes, ma'am," he said with a soft South Carolina drawl.

Lieutenant Yates took the chair next to Galia. Once he was released from his rigid posture, Patti could see how nervous he was. A muscle twitched in a pink cheek. Looking at her only made him more tense. His eyes darted around the room. Then they fastened on McGill's picture, Patti saw. Something about it seemed to tell him everything was okay.

Jim's shit-eating grin, she thought.

Or maybe that she would have such a photo in the Oval Office.

Patti read from Lieutenant Yates's personnel folder. "You trained to be a fighter pilot."

Turning back to her, he said, "Yes, ma'am."

She closed the folder and looked at the young man not as his ultimate superior but as one human being to another. "I'm very sorry for the losses you suffered, Lieutenant. Your friends' deaths and your

chance to fly.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“Are you still receiving psychological counseling?”

Welborn blinked, but didn’t look away. “Only at such times as I feel the need, ma’am ... Not so often anymore.” He looked as if that was all he had to say, but then he added, “Mostly, these days, I find comfort in talking with my mother.”

“She’s a good woman, your mother?”

“The best, ma’am.” Welborn then lightened the moment with a grin. “Why, I believe she even voted for you.”

The president smiled, too. “Please give her my thanks and tell her I’ll do my best to live up to her trust.”

“I will, ma’am.”

“Lieutenant, in reading your record, I see that you’ve completed your Criminal Investigator Training Program and your OSI agency-specific coursework. You’re now a federally credentialed special agent. But you are in your first-year probationary period. Do I have all that right?”

“Yes, ma’am, you do.”

Galia stood up. Welborn started to get to his feet, too, unsure if he was suddenly being dismissed. The chief of staff waved him back into his seat.

“Please excuse me, Madam President, but there’s another matter that requires my attention. If that’s all right with you.”

The president nodded; sure that Galia had scripted her departure, even though she hadn’t shared that knowledge with her boss. Before leaving, Galia handed the president a sheet of paper.

“Perhaps this will add to your conversation with the lieutenant,” she said, and departed.

Patti took in the contents of the page at a glance. She slipped it into Yates’s personnel folder and turned her attention back to him.

“You have an office at Andrews, Lieutenant?” Andrews Air Force Base, in nearby suburban Maryland, was the headquarters of the Office of Special Investigations.

“A desk, ma’am.”

“The Colonel Linberg matter is your first investigation?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Have you done any work on it yet?”

“No, ma’am. The file landed on my desk only an hour before I was ordered to report here. I was reading it and contemplating my first interview with the colonel when I got your call.”

She looked at the young man in front of her for a long moment, thinking this was what being president was all about. The power to change people’s lives profoundly. Though not necessarily for the better.

“Lieutenant, you’ll soon have an office. Here at the White House.”

Welborn’s eyes went wide.

“And I’ll be the one who decides how your probationary period works out,” the president added. “Get everything you need from your desk at Andrews. Your new digs will be waiting for you when you get back.”

THE PRESIDENT stepped into a briefing in the pressroom, unannounced. The newsies all had the manners to get to their feet without being told, and Patti sat them back down again.

“I just stopped by to make sure you’re not abusing my press secretary too badly.”

“Just badly enough, ma’am,” a voice in the back called out, drawing a laugh.

“Fair enough. Let Aggie know if you have any suggestions how we might all work better together. Feel free to offer constructive self-criticism, too.”

The president was about to leave when David Gregory snagged her with a question, “Madam President, have you seen that some media outlets have started to refer to you by your initials, PDG?”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that, David.”

A mischievous smile lit the reporter’s face. “But have you heard that some people say that your initials stand for Pretty Damn Good?”

Keeping a perfectly straight face, she answered, “That’s close to what I’ve heard, but I believe you left out the comma. It should be: Pretty, damn good.”

The president dazzled the reporters with her best smile and left with a wave. Knowing the sound bite would be all over the news that night.

MCGILL WAS already home when the president returned to the residence for the night. He hadn’t seen his wife the night before; the press of business

had kept her away until he was already asleep. Now, he had two bottles, each in a silver ice bucket, waiting for her. Poland Springs Sparkling Mineral Water. Leapfrog California Chardonnay. Patti sat next to her husband on the drawing room sofa and opted for the water.

"I'm gainfully employed again," McGill told her. "My first client."

"I know," Patti said.

"You know?"

"I'm the president. I know everything."

McGill wasn't omniscient, but he was pretty quick. "Galia told you. And no way Sweetie, Deke, or Leo told her. So she's either got my office bugged or somebody on the client's side ratted her out."

"Chana Lochlan. I stopped by the pressroom today to take a good look at her."

Patti wasn't the jealous type, McGill knew, but her curiosity was relentless.

"If Galia has my office bugged, are you going to fire her?"

"I'll slap her wrist. Tell her not to do it again."

"Good to know where I stand in the pecking order."

Patti kissed McGill. As always, he could imagine a thousand violins starting to play as the closing credits of a movie rolled. "You know where you stand," she said. "But I do need Galia."

"Your pacification effort is working, don't stop now."

"Jim, I need a favor."

The nice thing about being married to a trained communicator, it was easy to pick right up on her tone. McGill stopped joking and sat back. He opened his hands wide.

"Whatever I can do."

She told him about Colonel Carina Linberg and Lieutenant Welborn Yates.

"Welborn?" McGill asked.

"A lovely young man. Dedicated to the service of his country."

"Working his first case. Likely susceptible to pressure from above, if I'm reading between the lines right."

Patti nodded. "That's why I moved him to the White House. To shelter him. I've taken quite a liking to him."

McGill only nodded. He wasn't the jealous type either.

“Lieutenant Yates and three friends, all Air Force, were on their way back to California after another buddy got married in Las Vegas. It was the wee small hours of the morning, they were a block away from the freeway entrance when a car ran a red light and broadsided them.”

“Welborn was the sole survivor,” McGill said, knowing immediately.

“Four fighter jocks. Only one thought himself mortal enough to need a seat belt, and Welborn, despite his seat belt, sustained damage to his right inner ear. Doesn’t keep him from doing most things, but he can’t take the multi-G forces of flying fighter jets.”

McGill poured a glass of wine for each of them.

“Gets worse, doesn’t it?” he asked.

“The driver of the other car walked away, was never found, and the car had been stolen the night before. No identification has ever been made.”

McGill sipped his wine. “So Welborn stays in the military and learns the skills he figures he’ll need to track the SOB down someday.”

“I’m told an OSI posting is the second-most-popular career choice in the Air Force, but, yes, that’s my assumption, too. Which tells me he has a strong sense of justice.”

“Or vengeance.”

“You haven’t met him.”

McGill shrugged and drank some more wine.

“So you think the kid will play it straight on the Linberg case,” he asked, “with you giving him political cover?”

“Yes.”

“And you’d like me to do what, tutor him? Let him know the kinds of things that don’t get covered in the textbooks and the lectures.”

“Exactly. Only he’ll never see you. I’ll be your go-between.”

“Our little secret?”

Patti nodded.

“Unless Galia has the residence bugged, too,” McGill said.

“That would be cause for termination.”

McGill smiled. “Like I said, whatever I can do.” He kissed his wife and excused himself to take a shower.

Patti took her wineglass and went to a window looking out on Lafayette Square. Using her free hand, she pulled back a curtain that McGill had closed. A dozen or so protestors walked a tight, relentless circle, as they’d

done every day since she'd moved into the White House. The Peace Vigil people who'd camped out opposite the White House continuously since 1981 had ceded some of their space to the new group. Each of the protestors carried the same sign: FREE ERNA.

Erna Godfrey. Current resident of the Federal Death Penalty Facility in Terre Haute, Indiana. Wife of Reverend Burke Godfrey, pastor of the Salvation's Path Church.

The woman who'd killed Patti's beloved first husband, Andy Grant.