

First Daughter  
By Fish Stark

For two of my most influential middle school teachers—Mrs. Mochler, my English teacher, who provided the guidance that a writer needs, and Mrs. Flynn, my math teacher, who provided the insanity that a writer needs.

# 1

The Albanian Capitol was a large, white marble building dotted with Albanian flags and bird poop. Lawmakers and their interns scurried around like ants in a maze, trying to look busy when in fact they weren't. All the lawmakers did was hustle bribes from cigar-chomping corporate lobbyists who were bulging out of their three-piece suits while their interns played online games and brewed the occasional coffee. This was not where the real work of the Albanian government was done—this was a joke. The real work was done in a sleek black building seven miles away.

Gleaming like a polished ruby, it was what the Albanians had purchased with the hard-earned tax dollars the citizens had gotten from selling leftover war weapons to Iran, Jordan, and a scientology cult. Over a thousand people were employed in this complex. Here no bribes were hustled, and no online games were played unless you wanted to be jobless for the rest of your life. Here the guards marched vigilantly, proudly showcasing their gleaming machine guns to any civilians who happened by, causing the civilians to think: *Something important is going on in there, but I have no freaking idea what.* That was what set Albania apart from the rest of the world—the public was always assured that there was something going on. In fact, there was.

The Albanian Military and Intelligence center was where the soldiers were trained, the spies were trained, the orders for tanks and guns were filled out, and where the self-appointed defense minister worked on his plan.

No one knew the defense minister's name, not even the defense minister himself. He had been brainwashed years ago after a mission went awry, and was too busy laboring over elaborate blueprints like a millionaire's trophy wife labors over her Chihuahua to create a new name for himself. He was simply called 'sir' to his face, but even he knew that behind his back everybody called him Marrosur Kopil. Crazy Bastard. And that he was. He wouldn't had minded had anyone on his staff chosen to call him 'Marrosur Kopil'; however, he did once drown an American in a tank of acid because he had called him 'pal'.

None of Albania's prime ministers had been able to look him in the eye and tell him to step down, not even the one who very memorably told Kim Jon Il to "Get a haircut, for Christ's sake."

Marrosur Kopil dreamed of having a nuclear arsenal that would make America's enormous collection of bombs look like measly firecrackers, and he had a master plan to achieve such nuclear dominance. But first, he needed a source of money, and while people were giving away American dollars like those ugly sweaters your aunt sends you for Christmas, he did not trust American dollars any more than he trusted his wives, which might have explained why he was on his seventeenth, and none of the previous 16 had ever been found.

Marrosur Kopil had a master plan for getting the money as well. Once, he had tried and failed, after which he blamed everyone but himself and ordered the army to invade Macedonia, but calmed down by the time the prime minister's secretary's secretary came with an armed escort and told him, quaking with fear, that the prime minister refused to go through with the invasion. Kopil had noticed with pleasure that the man had wet his pants during the discussion.

It was time to try again. If there was one thing Kopil would not do, it was fail. He once used a blowtorch to break into an uncooperative vending machine to get his rightful pack of Skittles, the only American thing he had ever trusted or would ever trust.

He pushed a button on his intercom. "Send for Griffin Peshk," he rasped, then yanked the cord out of the wall before his secretary could bombard him with follow-up questions.

The secretary had only been there two weeks—the job paid well, but no one lasted long—but she knew enough to know that when Kopil's demands weren't met, he got angry. As in I-Will-Kill-Your-Kids angry. She had three kids, all of whom she loved dearly, so she turned to the two guards on either side of her and said, "Kopil wants Griffin Peshk."

Collectively, the two guards had five kids and did not want to see any of them hurt, so they set off at a jog, even though neither of them knew who the hell Griffin Peshk was.

In fact, only fifteen people knew who Griffin Peshk was. Ten were dead. There was a reason for all this secrecy--Griffin Peshk was Marrosur Kopil's secret weapon.

## 2

A pair of fists swung around like loose cannonballs, slamming loudly into the punching bags. The bags deflated for a second, leaving a fist-shaped hole where they had been punched, then returned to normal form, the poster children of resilience. After one lethal roundhouse kick too many, one of the bags popped open, spilling stuffing all over the floor of the barren and dimly lit room. The Albanian government spent almost as much on these bags as they did for educating the nation's children, who were still learning to read out of readers from the World War I era.

Griffin Peshk shrugged and went to work on the other bags. What he had broken was just a bag. It would be replaced. "Never attach yourself to anything," roared Sir, the hatchet-faced instructor who visited Griffin every day. Sir taught at the normal spy school, showing the 300 children who had been taken from their parents for training when times were so bad that you could get ten kids for a loaf of bread, but Griffin was not allowed to go to that school.

Sir had determined, ten years ago, that Griffin was special, and that he must be kept alone so that he would not be distracted. He had never watched TV, been outside of the Albanian intelligence center, and he had never heard music in his life. Sir's philosophy was that the perfect spy had to be detached from everything. From what Griffin knew about religion, espionage was like Buddhism, but with more guns.

If Griffin went to a normal school, his lack of social skills and pop culture knowledge would cause him to be ridiculed. Spy instinct would have inspired him to break the heckler's neck using only three fingers, and of course that would get him expelled. Besides, Griffin had no need to go to a normal school. He had become accustomed to the rigorous training regimens put in place by Sir, like a person moving from New York to Texas gets accustomed to the fact that all of their TV shows now come on at different times.

Griffin was thirteen, but looked older. Not because of his size—he was only five feet, seven inches tall and quite slim—but because he had a weathered look to him. There was a hardness in his face and eyes usually reserved for a retiree who sits on the front porch with a shotgun and yells at everyone who passes by.

Griffin had been punching and kicking and spinning for an hour and a half straight, so he stopped, stretched, and slurped a little bit of water from a thermos. Sir

had told him that it was supposed to last the whole day. "Some missions, there won't be any food or water, and you're going to have to learn to adjust." Griffin was allowed to eat normally that day, but God knows what he'd get tomorrow. Sir was about as consistent as John Kerry and as predictable as a pop quiz.

Griffin treated himself to another sip of water, then put the cap on the thermos and swished it around. It was about a quarter of the way full. He checked his watch. Dinner would be in an hour or so; he saved the rest for then.

He wiped the sweat off his forehead and went back to the punching bags, hitting them with an intensity only exceeded by that of the hosts of *The View*. He had been whaling at the bags for an hour when Sir walked in.

The two guards the receptionist had sent to find Griffin Peshk had spent an hour asking everyone they saw "Who's Griffin Peshk and where can we find him?" They got mostly blank stares and a few requests to show their ID cards. After an hour, they realized that they were possibly in very great danger of Kopil's wrath, so they called the secretary and told her that not only had they not been able to find Griffin Peshk, but they were also taking their families and leaving their country. The secretary thought this was an excellent idea, so she scribbled down a note: "Peshk not found. I quit", gave it to one of the guards, and sprinted out of the building.

After receiving the note, Kopil angrily realized that only five people in the entire building knew who Griffin was. Kopil hated mistakes, but he hated them even worse when he was the one who made them, because there was no one else to blame. He threw a lamp across the room, which calmed him down. Throwing large objects did that for him. He reached for his phone; he'd send a janitor to clean it up. But first, he called Sir.

Griffin spun around as soon as he heard Sir enter the room. Sir looked him over—he was sweaty and shirtless. Kopil wouldn't like that. But Sir decided that Kopil had wanted Griffin so urgently that matters of personal appearance wouldn't matter.

Griffin just stared at Sir, waiting for him to say something. He would speak when he was spoken to, and not a moment before.

Sir jerked his head to the door. "Kopil wants to see you," he deadpanned, beckoning to Griffin.

It seemed that no reply was needed, so Griffin simply nodded and trotted out of the door after Kopil. He had no idea what Kopil wanted with him—he had only spoken to the man twice—but knew that Sir gave Kopil weekly updates on Griffin’s progress. Something big was about to happen, Griffin could tell—he didn’t think it was likely that Kopil had been grooming him for years to send him on an errand to the supermarket. But he wasn’t about to ask questions of his superiors, so he just stared straight ahead and kept his mind on keeping in step with Sir, who was an Olympic qualifier for the 40-yard-dash before trying to poison a teammate who threatened his status as the fastest 40-yard-dasher in Albania. He had been promptly banned from the Olympics forever, and if he even so much as put an Olympics cap on his head, the Olympics would take their lawyers and sue him for all his money, his house, his car, and his kidneys. Griffin wondered if that was why he was always so moody, but knew it was not his place. His place was—well, Kopil would tell him that.

### 3

Kopil was chewing on the end of a ridiculously overpriced cigar when Griffin walked in to the room. Kopil beckoned Griffin over to the understuffed chair that sat in front of Kopil's desk, indicating that Griffin sit down. Kopil disliked the concept of hospitality (as well as the concepts of friendship, civility, and human rights), but knew that if he didn't extend an offer, Griffin would stand there looking down at Kopil until he was told to sit. Kopil hated people looking down on him. He was five foot one, a stature that somewhat embarrassed him, with the only advantage being that it made him feel like Napoleon. He had tried to correct his stature by ordering twelve-inch platform shoes a few years back, but he had promptly fallen down and broken his leg.

"You wanted to see me, sir?" said Griffin. He knew that the "speak only when spoken to" rule applied with Kopil especially, but he figured, after a long silence, that Kopil was not necessarily in his right mind and needed to be reminded that there was someone else in the room with him.

Kopil nodded his head and sank deeper into the padded leather of his chair. "Ten years of solitude and successful practice missions. I think you are ready."

Griffin wished Kopil would stop being cryptic. "For what, sir?"

Kopil stood and began to pace about the room. "Ever since you knocked out half the 6-year-olds in the academy at age three, I knew you were something special. I told Sir, put this boy aside just for me. He's strong and he's quick and he's smart and he looks loyal. I told Sir you would make your country proud."

Kopil felt more authoritative now that he was taller than Griffin, who was seated.. He put a fatherly hand on Griffin's shoulder. Normally Kopil did not do fatherly—the only babies he cared about were his master plans. Of course, Griffin was one of his master plans, or part of one anyway. The plan had failed once, with one of his best operatives. He was sure of it now—Griffin was the only one who could carry it out. "Now is the time, Griffin." Normally Kopil was not one to beat around the bush, but God damn it, this was his glory moment and he wanted to savor it as much as he could.

Griffin was getting annoyed with Kopil's constant talking. *I could kill this man right now*, he thought. *Of course, he is my boss*. He pondered for a minute, then decided that it wasn't a good career move.

Kopil was now staring Griffin straight in the face. He regretted that he only needed to bend down a little to do it. He needed to have a shorter chair for his visitors. "I want you," he paused dramatically, like an overrated actor who pauses dramatically simply so the swoons of preteen girls can fill the theater during the silence, "to assassinate the President of the United States."

Griffin wasn't surprised by much, but Kopil's comments shocked him. The most important and best-protected person in the world—and Kopil wanted him to carry out the assassination. Had Kopil gone mad? On second thought, Griffin already knew the answer to this question. Trying to sound professional, he asked, "How am I going to do that, sir?"

Kopil threw up his hands like a parent who has somehow gotten the idea that their first-grader can learn algebra and then becomes frustrated when Junior obviously can't get any farther than adding two-digit numbers. "Of course we have a plan for you, boy! Never forget that. As a spy, always have a plan."

*"Don't rely too much on your plan,"* Sir's voice echoed in his head. *"Plans fail."* Griffin knew that Sir was maybe not as book-smart as Kopil, but had 300 times more common sense, and, when you got down to it, that was all that really counted, especially when most of the things you used your book-smarts for involved drawing elaborate blueprints for defense mechanisms for which you would never ever ever get funding. But Griffin couldn't very well tell Kopil that he didn't want to do the plan. After all, it was a bold plan—pull off a huge assassination and make his country proud. It was the big chance to serve the country that he'd always wanted, and he'd expected it to be hard—but not completely and utterly impossible.

"The President is hiring butlers around your age," said Kopil. "Idiot that he is, he thinks he can skirt around his country's child labor laws so that he doesn't have to pay his butlers as much. And since the hiring is all under the table, no one will be screening your background, because they're not meant to know. And after our failed assassination attempt three weeks ago, that's exactly what we want."

Griffin had read about that in the paper, but he had no idea that Kopil had try to pull that off. "I thought it was done by Palestinians, sir."

Kopil laughed, which sounded something like a cow in a blender. "Of course not. It was one of our best agents, too, but we send them over there disguised as

Palestinians.” He laughed again, which sounded this time like a tabby cat in a woodchipper.

Griffin wanted to point out that the Middle East was not that far from Albania, and it would make more sense to say that the agents were from Argentina if the Americans wanted to launch a massive nuclear attack as revenge. But as long as Albania was safe, it was of no consequence to him.

“So,” continued Kopil, who was wont to switch back and forth through topics completely without warning, “We want you to simply pose as a butler for a few weeks—simply perform menial tasks for the President. You may find it to be a vacation.” He chuckled. Griffin thought it would be polite to laugh with Kopil, but he didn’t really find humor in his comment.

“Then,” said Kopil, “Our DC operative will give you a call, and you will assassinate the president. You’ll live in the White House, so they won’t screen you every morning, and of course you’re adept at concealing weapons.” At night, Kopil dreamed about Griffin polishing the President’s shoes, then producing a gun and shooting the president in one fluid motion. Before anyone knew what had happened, Griffin would be gone, and Kopil would be a genius. Maybe then the government would be kind enough to spring for a shoemaker who could manufacture adequate twelve-inch platform heels.

This sounded easy enough to Griffin. He’d been taught about conducting undercover operations, and the only fighting would consist of a quick shot and running like heck. No matter how daunting the task seemed, when he looked at it for what it was, it wasn’t half as hard.

Kopil flashed his plaque-stained teeth and kept on talking. He had an audience to impress, and he was going to make sure that Griffin Peshk knew that he was a genius by the time he’d left the office. “Then,” Kopil continued, “We have control over some congressmen and senators, a few of whom are friendly with Vice-President Phillips—a completely unsuspecting man who would no doubt appoint them to powerful government offices in the event of the President’s death—something that would give us the opportunity to funnel money into our nuclear weapons program.”

Griffin knew that it would somehow come around to the nuclear weapons program, just like all Disney films somehow came around to a talking animal telling a kid to be himself. Kopil loved his nuclear weapons program. It was said that Kopil never

went to the South of France or Disneyland for a holiday—he simply went to the secret underground nuclear weapons factory and watched a bunch of engineers who couldn't tell an IBCM from IBM trying to decide what the hell to do with that uranium stuff and eventually throw it into the wastebasket. Undoubtedly the first thing Kopil would do with the money was hire some semi-competent engineers.

Kopil knew he had lost his audience. The boy had been trained to stay attentive for seventy-two hours straight on stakeouts, but Kopil knew that his speeches were more boring than three straight days of staring at an empty house. He had heard this from the microphones he put by the water coolers to make sure that his employees were not talking about personal matters (he also frequently heard them say that he was not trusting). Kopil decided to end his evil genius speech and shift into travel agent mode. "There's a civilian plane scheduled to leave in two hours," he barked, dismayed at the lackluster response his stellar monologue had gotten him. Griffin could at least have clapped. "You'll be on it. Things will be provided for you when you land in America. Our operative there will take you to the White House, where you will begin your mission. Any questions?"

Griffin had many questions, most of which were some variation of "Would you kindly shut up now?", but none that he thought Kopil would appreciate. "No, sir," he deadpanned.

"Good. You may go," droned Kopil, reseating himself and his desk and writing on a notepad. *Get: Platform shoes. Speechwriter.* "Make your country proud," he said to Griffin's retreating back.

If Griffin had been well versed in the language of normal people in his age group, he would have said, very emphatically, *Duh*. Of course he would make his country proud. This was what he'd been working towards his whole life. This was everything he knew. He wasn't about to screw it up.

## 4

He was under the cover of the Palestinian name Mosaf Al-Toran, but he didn't like that name one bit, so all his Albanian agents knew him simply as The Man. He was the contact for every operative that ever came to DC—he set them up with a place to stay while they carries out their mission, he told them which street corners had the people who were hawking handguns (If there was a slum or a high school within a mile, you had good odds on every corner). And, to save money on Super Shuttles, he picked people up at the airport.

Right now he was standing in front of the Continental Airlines baggage claim (#17) in Washington Dulles international airport, holding a sign that read PESHK in big block letters, wearing a suit with the sleeves rolled back and a built-in holster that was unrecognizable unless lifted his jacket and looked inside. These days anytime you took a gun within two miles of anyplace with a human population not located in Alabama, you would be in jail faster than a drunk celebrity captured by an officer who had an overwhelming desire to see his name on the news.

He had been talking on his cell phone to one of Kopil's top assistants and asked whom he was picking up. When the man told him, he let out a string of English curse words—a nasty habit he'd picked up in America, like drinking coffee and watching sports other than cricket. A passing family decked out in gaudy Hawaiian shirts and sunglasses that were seven sizes too large overheard his barrage of obscenities, and the parents glared at him self-righteously over the top of their stupid sunglasses. He glared back, then turned to his phone again.

"I thought that *I* was going to be the one to carry this out!" he barked into the phone. "And now you send me a *teenager*? What the hell are you *thinking*?" He paused a minute. "Are you saying that a teenager is a better covert operative than myself?" He paused again. "Kopil is putting our most precious operation in the hands of a thirteen-year-old? Has he gone mad?" After getting the obvious 'Yes,' from the assistant on the other end of the line, he uttered a few more choice words and slammed the phone shut. Mumbling Albanian phrases under his breath: "Not fair..." "Thought I was going to do it..." "Teenager...", he saw a tough-looking kid in sunglasses run through the terminal looking around frantically.

Griffin was not scared by much, but the airport's Kidz Fun Zone, complete with manically grinning paper dolls holding letters that stood outside its entrance, spelling its name, was his first real exposure to his American peers, and frankly, he did not like them one bit. Three kids fought over whether to watch James Bond, Sleeping Beauty, or Cars on the big-screen TV (James Bond won, as the kid who wanted it was several heads taller than any of the other kids). Six kids sat at Playstations set up around the room, shouting out button combos as they beat their virtual opponents to death. Chubby kids feasted on cookies rolled in on a cart by a sad-looking worker—who had obviously drawn the short straw—every hour, on the hour. Girls wearing denim skirts that barely covered their butts expertly flew their thumbs over the keyboard of their cell phones. Griffin had been taught to read people's fingers as they typed so that he could secretly decipher email conversations, but these girls were using some sort of code he had never covered. "nm, u?" "omg rotflol" "wtf hes ur bf now thats gr8"—all of these were completely foreign to him, and he was fluent in four different languages and could recognize seventy-eight others.

The only people that seemed less happy than him to be there were the perky women in red blazers—but then again, they had been doing this for every day of their lives. So when one of them told him, "We're gonna have to keep you here for a while until someone who's authorized to pick you up comes to sign your unaccompanied minor forms," the words "keep you here for a while" resonated in his mind like someone had pushed the 'echo' dial on a sound system *way* too far. Griffin had been taught to withstand torture, of course, but he had also been taught to avoid it if he possibly could, so he turned and ran like heck.

Shaking his head to try and get the horrors of his rude culture shock out of his mind, he looked up at the signs to try and get his bearings. The baggage claim was all the way across the airport, so he had plenty of time to lose whoever might be following him. He skirted around stands selling 'Property of F.B.I.' T-shirts and ducked in and out of the restroom once—he didn't stay long, though, this was Washington; no telling when you were gonna run into Mark Foley or Larry Craig.

When he finally reached the baggage claim, he had broken a sweat, but wasn't panting. He'd run faster and harder for farther and in worse conditions. He stopped at the man holding the sign that said PESHK and stretched his hand out. Kopil and Sir

weren't much for shaking hands, so Griffin didn't quite know how, but he had read that it was an American custom, like eating Big Macs and dressing your Chihuahuas like children.

Seventeen minutes late. The Man had been counting. He did not like lateness, and he certainly didn't like the boy. Then came the fact that the boy seemed to have run through the whole terminal and not look a bit tired—The Man, who diligently did his 5-mile-run-5-mile-bike-20-minute-weights-50-pushups-50-situps regimen each day but would start breathing heavily after the first ten minutes and by the end would be puffing like an inhaler-toting zit-faced geek who would rather hack someone else's World of Warcraft account than run laps in gym class, was jealous of Griffin's superhuman endurance as well as frustrated by his lateness. And the fact that Griffin had snatched the single most important mission in the world right out of his hands didn't help either; so when Griffin stuck out his hand, The Man chose to pretend to ignore it.

Griffin was used to rude brushings-off just like one might be used to glasses or hibernating in the wintertime. If you were a spy for the Albanian government, the one thing you weren't was social. Griffin awkwardly withdrew his hand and simply nodded.

"So..." said The Man smugly, looking him over, his voice full of contempt like that of a political talk-show host, "*You're* the one they sent."

Griffin thought that was obvious. If the man was going to play his 'I'm better than you' games, so would he. After all, that was one of Griffin's favorite games. "They thought I was the best man for the job, *sir*," Griffin said edgily. He thought about adding a nearly unnoticeable smirk, but decided against it. Griffin smiled only after completing a very hard mission. No exceptions.

The man locked eyes with Griffin, trying to intimidate him with a stare that could get a preacher to swear his allegiance to Satan, but Griffin wasn't biting. The Man decided to take another dig at his age. "You've had, what? Three years experience?"

"Ten years intense training," deadpanned Griffin, "And I'm not talking about sitting out in America giving directions to other agents." He looked at The Man, who was trying not to show any emotion, but his nose twitched just for a second and the crease between his eyebrows got a little deeper, just the body language that let Griffin know he'd hit hard. "Kopil said he wants me to handle exclusively field work. By the way, he

said you'd provide my bags." *Luggage boy*, thought Griffin. He pondered handing The Man a tip, but decided that would be overdoing it a little.

Pamela Juliette Washburn hated her job. She hated the red blazer and heels that were part of her uniform. She hated the nametag over her left breast with PAM on it in big block letters. She'd *asked* for Pamela, but they didn't care, they just refused to listen, like congressmen in a seminar on ethics. And the one thing she hated most was crazy children. Normal children? She had two well-behaved nieces and she loved them both. Hyper children she could deal with. But crazy kids—the kinds who drew on the walls of the Kidz Fun Zone or simply ran the hell away—irritated her. After walking a mile in those loathsome uniform heels—red to match the blazer, making her look like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*—she had become even more irritated. So by the time she got to Griffin—how stupid can these kids get, he's talking to a stranger who's a lot bigger and stronger and possibly a rapist, she thought—Pam looked as if she had gargantuan PMS, and felt like it too. And after passing age 50 seven weeks previously, the standard menopausal crankiness had set in. The combined forces of menopause, working overtime with the nation's most precious resource, and a decision-making haze induced by the growing number of pills in her daily diet caused her to reach out and grab Griffin roughly by the shoulder.

Griffin did not like being grabbed roughly by the shoulder, especially when he didn't know who the hell was doing it. His fight or flight reflexes kicked in, and since he'd spent the last ten years doing martial arts training, his body instantly switched into fight mode. He spun around and delivered a blunt karate chop to the side of Pam's head. Only then did he look to inspect who had grabbed him—he always Jackie Chan'd first and asked questions later. He shrugged when he saw it was a woman from the Kidz Fun Zone—if he'd known that in retrospect, he would not have gone all Jet Li on her—but in Griffin's world, a casualty was a casualty, and whether it was a lady or not didn't matter—he treated them equally. After all, they'd fought for equal rights for all this time, who was he not to honor them?

The Man looked on, initially shocked at Griffin's display of insensitivity. Hitting a woman! And one unarmed no less! But as much as The Man did not like Griffin, he couldn't be unfair—the woman looked madder and crazier than Rosie O'Donnell on steroids and had grabbed Griffin from behind. He'd responded in the only way he

knew—besides, how could he have known it was a lady? The last apparent thing, the one that the man least wanted to recognize, was the simple truth—the kid was good at what he did.

Edward Kames was 67 and should have been retired, but thought he was too young to sit around playing computer solitaire. The police were skeptical about letting him return to the force because of his over-eager tendencies—Kames wanted the thrill of an arrest so bad that he had arrested a mall Santa Claus for fraud and false impersonation. So they sent him where they sent all the other police rejects—the airport, where he would skulk around for eight hours a day making sure people didn't try and smuggle a bomb onto flight 314 to Tulsa. It was the ultimate garbage job, because everyone knew that nothing dangerous lay in those liquids of three (3) ounces or less sealed in one (1) quart sized plastic bag. Kames had taken to wondering whether solitaire at home would be better—he'd been here a week and the only work he'd done was reconnecting snotty-nosed six-year-olds with Dora The Explorer backpacks to their mommies and daddies, who were most commonly yuppies who had been too busy yakking on the Bluetooth to notice that their kid had been left by the Newsweek stand when they went to buy a frappuccino.

But Edward Kames, 67, was about to become a hero. Arresting a scamp who had the nerve to knock out a defenseless flight attendant (or whatever the hell she was—what kind of job would make you wear a uniform with an ugly red blazer and Wizard of Oz red heels?) was what he'd always wanted. He extracted his handcuffs, which had grown rusty after staying in his utility belt for 40 years, and with his other hand tried to take his gun out of his holster. However, since he rarely did this—most deluded security guards practiced in front of the mirror, but that depressed him too much—he didn't quite remember how that thing was supposed to get out of there. As he fumbled with the holster (Dang, those things were more complicated than that Miranda Rights thing, which he'd never been able to memorize—but it was OK, they only used it on TV. What would they do if you forgot it—sue you?) he yelled the phrase he supposed Keifer Sutherland would yell in that situation: "Dammit!" The strange looks he earned from passing travelers reminded him that yes, that was what Keifer Sutherland says, but not what he would say in this current situation. He contemplated his options and settled on

changing the phrase to one that was decidedly more cliché, but it would work for the moment. "Freeze, scumbag!"

Griffin had only done training missions and never had any real encounters with cops, but his general opinion was that when a cop is reaching for his gun and yelling "Freeze, scumbag!", the best option was to leave the area and quick. He looked at The Man and nodded. He could tell that The Man wished that he'd been the one to give the nod, but right now it was time to run. Griffin and The Man started walking to the door.

Edward Kames, 67, was watching his one chance slip away. These guys weren't playing fair! He spoke into his radio: "Hi. Code—" He wasn't sure what to say. Code red? Too strong. Code yellow? He hated yellow. It reminded him of bees. He also hated bees. What came between yellow and red? "Magenta," he said decisively. "By Continental baggage claim one." By this time he had managed to get his gun out.

Griffin's decision had been easy before, but when you have a gun pointed at you, everything gets a bit more complicated. If you try and run, you might get shot. Of course, with this guy, Griffin doubted it—he was holding the gun all wrong anyway, and didn't look like he could hit Michael Moore at point-blank range. "You got a gun?" he whispered to The Man.

"Yeah." The Man grudgingly handed his gun over.

Three more officers moved into the area. They saw another cop with his gun drawn facing a thirteen-year-old kid who had also pulled a weapon. Kids these days, they thought. The cop had noticed the gun now, and he started to run away. Old people these days, they sighed.

Edward Kames, 67, had had enough of being a cop. He was going to run and run and run and quit and go home and play solitaire and collect his pension and adopt a cat for the rest of his life.

The three officers drew their guns.

Three more officers moved in through the outer doors, tentatively.

The Man jerked his head at Griffin, then at the three officers. It was a cross between "Help me out here" and "Show me what you can do". Griffin nodded. He was ready for a challenge, like a Chihuahua who notices a Doberman peeing on the same fire hydrant that *he* had peed on last week (You mark it, you own it) and decides to bark.

The Man tensed up, took a deep breath, then let it out, like a yoga instructor except he was carrying a gun. Then, quickly, on a breath: "Go."

Then all heck broke loose.

The three officers opened fire—warning shots, of course. Shooting kids looks bad on resumes.

Griffin, meanwhile, had other ideas. He took three calculated shots with the accuracy of a genius playing Trivial Pursuit/ one knocked a guard's walkie-talkie out of his hand, one that knocked off a second guard's hat, and a third one that sailed over the head of a guard intentionally, and hit the fire alarm box behind the guard. The shrill noise reverberated throughout the room as travelers dropped their luggage, cops ran to the scene, and the Starbucks workers whipped out their greencards in fear of a raid by the ICE.

Edward Kames, 67, had turned back to see what all the excitement was, but didn't want to stop running away from the horrid scene either. He ran sideways into a wall.

Meanwhile, The Man was attacking the cops who had just come in from outside. He was skilled in one-on-one combat, could hold his own in two-on-one, but in three-on-one was about as successful as a trout with its fins tied behind its spine. As soon as he managed to land a good punch on one cop, another one came from behind him like a freight train with booster rockets hooked up to the engine and played the bongos on his head with a nightstick.

Griffin knew that more cops would be on their way, and if all the stereotypes that Griffin had read about American cops were true, then they would be hyped up from coffee and doughnuts, their eager fingers not so patiently waiting on the trigger like a five-year-old in a line for cookies. And then, as soon as they saw someone who was not a white American, it would be shoot first, doughnuts later. Worrying about public outrage wasn't even on the radar screen.

The man had one of the cops in a headlock and was fighting the other two off with one hand—not bad, he thought to himself—before Griffin came flying in like a guy at a football game who, having consumed five chili dogs and seven beers, has to run out onto the field and touch Peyton Manning's helmet. One cop remained, but as the man got ready to hurl a punch, Griffin lifted him off of his feet and slammed him against a

pay phon. Griffin beckoned The Man over to the doors, and they shoved their way into the mass of bodies surging towards the automatic doors that were now permanently open—at least until everyone got the hell out of there.

## 5

Griffin and The Man pushed their way through the crowd, rushing like cattle who had just spotted a bunch of immaculate green grass to chew up and spit out. The Man pointed to an illegally parked car with a parking boot lying on the ground next to it—apparently the officer had been drawn away from applying the boot by the gunfire and alarms. Griffin took this to mean that this was their car, and his thoughts were confirmed as the man performed some sort of hood-slide maneuver that he'd learned from action films—he pulled it off quite well, thought Griffin—and jumped in the driver's seat, revving the car. Griffin sprinted to the passenger door and hopped in.

The Man shoved the brake to the floor, cursed, and switched pedals (Damn those American cars), stomping his foot down on the accelerator. Griffin jerked back like an 8-year-old girl who has had the class clown's pet snake shoved in her face. The car was doing about 15 times the allowed speed in the parking lot, but all the traffic controllers could do was blow their whistles and hoped that somehow, they would make high enough noises to call dogs to chew out the tires.

The Washington Police had been called in as well—Dispatch had reported a terrorist attack on the airport, and every cop desperate for some action came speeding over in their cruiser, their lights whirling around like a disco dance hall on wheels, and their siren set at a decibel reserved for Guns N Roses concerts.

The Man saw two of these cursed vehicles heading head-on at him now, a pair of jittery madmen behind the wheels, drunk on coffee, escalating an already dangerous situation. Typical cops, thought The Man, spinning the wheel 180 degrees.

An enraged taxi driver honked his horn, as enraged taxi drivers are wont to do, as The Man narrowly missed denting his taxi. One more accident, the boss had told him, and he would be fired. In the old country, where he was a prince, no one would have spoken to him in this way without getting their tongue cut out. Damn those revolutionaries, overthrowing him, exiling him, and implanting democracy! He missed the Mother Land and his palace with the golden toilet seats. There weren't any golden toilet seats in America—or at least if there were, he was not in possession of one.

Griffin had been given a crash course—emphasis on the crash, for it had involved lots of running into other cars—in driving and car chases by Sir, but he had never been able to apply these skills in real life. Griffin took back his earlier thoughts about The

Man—it didn't matter what Griffin's first impression was, this guy knew his automobile maneuvers.

The Man checked the rearview mirror and saw the ridiculous-looking lights—in his opinion, if they wanted to scare criminals, they shouldn't mount oversized Christmas tree lights in top of their cars—dropping behind the mass of people surging towards the parking lot, trying to remember if they parked their car in section Z or ZZ. The Man gave a smug grin when he saw Griffin's face, where he saw a look of mild impression. The Man wanted to sneer and say confidently "You ain't seen nothin' yet," like he saw an actor do on a cable movie once, but he couldn't bring himself to say 'ain't'. That was a phrase used by cowboys and rednecks, who, it appeared to The Man, had perfected the American dialect in between beer binges.

Though The Man admired cowboys, they were all dead, and he hated rednecks. One had lived in the apartment next to him and had taking a dislike to him ever since he had deduced that The Man was foreign. One night, after getting piss drunk at a Garth Brooks concert, he came after The Man with a Confederate Army sword, shouting racial slurs and what was supposed to be "Remember 9/11!" but somehow, in his drunkenness, got mixed up with "Remember the Alamo," so it sounded something like "Remembalamo Nine-a-member Levin!" The Man had no tolerance for ignorant assholes, people who waved weapons at him, and people who disturbed him while he was watching Gossip Girl, for which he had developed a secret fetish during his tenure in America. This man, having committed all of the aforementioned sins, was found in a storm drain three days later with a sword stuck in a place that would be quite uncomfortable had he been alive.

Griffin *hadn't* seen anything yet, of course. More police cars had materialized in front of them, their disco lights spinning around crazily, fifteen seconds away from a head-on collision. The Man looked in his rearview mirror and noticed that there were two other cars behind them. Short of driving into the terminal, there was seemingly no escape. The Man stomped harder on the accelerator. Prepare to be dazzled, Griffin Peshk, he thought, hoping this would quell the kid's smug aura of barely-pubescent superiority.

Griffin had been in plenty of practice missions before—ones that had caused him pain, ones in which he had broken bones, but none that came close to death. Even

during his waterboarding training, Griffin felt like he was drowning, but knew that he wasn't really going to die (and Sir never found out where the Triscuits were). But he had never really been in a situation where death was actually a possibility—and if he did die, his skills would be of no use. If there was a Hell, that was surely where he would go, and the little demons poking him with pitchforks would most likely be immune to karate chops. Griffin didn't fear death, but he wanted to avoid it if he could. He gripped the armrest and hoped The Man knew what he was doing.

One of the lessons that David Shields had learned at the police academy was pounded into his head by a squinty-eyed, nasal voiced instructor—keep your cool in dangerous situations. Of course, David Shields did not have a car racing right at him at seventy-five miles per hour when he pledged to keep his cool. He decided that his life was much more important than his cool and veered off into the building, smashing into it with the force of a thousand racy Miley Cyrus pics smashing into the headlines. Somewhere, a sunglasses-wearing surfer wept at this stunning rejection of the concept of “cool,” but David Shields was not concerned about that. He was alive.

Mac Stephens was a little older and more experienced, but he also did not wish to die. Unfortunately, he veered off a little too late and hit the side of The Man's car. Because he was going so fast and had the piss scared out of him, he lost control of the car, smashing into the other police cars following from behind, causing a giant police pile-up that blocked all the other cars from pursuing The Man.

Once he was sure no one else was following, The Man pushed a button. Outside, the license plate numbers swiveled around like a slot machine, and panels on the sides of the car pulled up to reveal racing stripes.

The Man believed that he had done a fair job of everything—good enough to show the little stinker what was what, at least. He looked over at Griffin, who seemed both rattled and impressed. They locked eyes for a minute, then Griffin offered a hand.

“I think we might have started this badly,” Griffin said emotionlessly. “I can tell you wanted this job. From what I just saw, you likely should have gotten it. But I don't give orders, Kopil does. I'm sorry.”

The Man reached over as best he could while driving and shook Griffin's hand. If there's one thing he had learned from watching ESPN, it's that everyone has to work together, or you turn into the Cincinnati Bengals.

"My name is Griffin Peshk," intoned Griffin, in such a way that the message was clear: I know you know my name, now tell me your name.

"They call me The Man," said The Man, examining Griffin out of the corner of his eye. Something about this kid was inhuman, like an actor who could do nothing but smile, because a plastic surgeon had forever pasted a smile on his face. Griffin had been gifted with a perpetually blank expression and a monotone, but that was what ten years of Sir would do to you. The Man wondered if Sir still taught at the Academy, but did not think it important enough to ask. "So," he said, "You've got to eat. Did they give you anything on the plane?" Griffin shook his head. "Didn't think so. We should go someplace to eat and debrief—is there anywhere you want to go?"

Griffin shrugged. Choices were foreign to Griffin—it was always Sir telling you to do this, do that, what to eat and not to eat—except the Triscuits, of course. But even those were smuggled in for him by a cafeteria employee (deceased) who had felt bad after Sir had done one of his random meal plans and put Griffin on a starvation diet for three weeks. So he simply shrugged and said, "I don't care."

"You don't care?"

"I don't care about much."

This was new for The Man, who had spent the last ten years in America, where the youth always wanted something that always came back to either fighting the system, pissing off their parents, throwing up in the bathroom, or getting concert tickets for whoever the music craze was centered around at the time. But he remembered Sir's crazy rants—"Never become attached to anything", Sir would bellow. The Man took those words to heart. He enjoyed a few simple pleasures—Doritos, Adam Sandler, and Gossip Girl especially—but they were nothing more than conveniences or time-wasters when he had nothing to do. His work was first priority, and second and third and fourth and fifth et cetera. He had never attempted to make friends or find a girlfriend, because that would most certainly conflict with his job eventually. You can't tape your friend and save it for later like Gossip Girl, and you can't put your girlfriend on a shelf to eat later like you do with Doritos. He was glad that this kid felt the same way about this as he did—you are a special agent for the glorious republic of Albania, for chrissakes, you can't have a life.

Griffin accepted The Man's praises "Oh, what a good agent you are," "Way to not be corrupted by emotions," et cetera, with a little bit of modesty, but mostly indifference. The list of what he didn't care about included compliments. If it didn't involve secrets or spying or fights (Griffin would love *Gossip Girl*), he wasn't interested.

The Man turned the wheel, following a Prius with a botched homemade paint job—someone had tried to paint fire on the side, but it looked like dripping orange slime—onto the exit. "There's a sandwich shop just off this exit here. We'll get some food and talk about your mission."

Gavin's Sandwich Shop was a restaurant a few blocks away from the capitol. The congressmen called it 'filthy'. The homeless people called it 'heaven'. The interns called it 'lunch'.

So did Griffin and The Man, who entered inconspicuously and took seats in a corner away from a window, so they could talk without being overheard by the bespectacled college students at the other corner of the restaurant. They had nothing to worry about, though—the interns wanted nothing more than to never hear anyone talk for any longer than five seconds again after spending the whole day on the house floor, taking notes on the speech of Stephen "Mouth" Meredula (D-NV), who was known for his machine-gun oratory style. After listening to him for an hour or so, many of the interns wished that they themselves possessed machine guns.

They didn't worry about the workers either—the cook was in the kitchen shoving stuff on sandwiches and playing tetris on his cell phone while the waitress, an ex-college student and budding poet who was kicked out of Georgetown because she refused to fulfill her math requirement, read Robert Frost, Edgar Allen Poe, and others from a book of collected poems and thought of taking the road less traveled by sneaking into Georgetown on little cat's feet, ripping out her calculus professor's heart, hiding it under the floor, and running like hell, stopping only to cremate Sam McGee.

When she had come over to halfheartedly take their orders (The Man ordered a Bacon Marinara Blast and a Diet Coke, and Griffin did the same. Food was food to him, he didn't care how it tasted), Griffin assessed her as Sir had taught him to. 5' 5", 130 pounds, layered auburn hair, dark brown eyes, a slightly upturned nose, and a feminine figure that was quite developed. Just straight facts, no room for adjectives like the ones the interns across the restaurant were coming up with: 'Smoking', 'Hot', 'Delicious',

'Stunning,' 'Sexy,' and, from the intern who never let his pocket dictionary out of sight, 'Radiant'.

Griffin and The Man made sure that the waitress was immersed in her poetry and that the interns were immersed in the waitress before The Man began to speak. "So," he said, "Kopil told you the basics?"

"If it's something Kopil dreamed up that he's talking about, nothing is *basic*," said Griffin expressionlessly. "It's all an incredibly intricate scheme to him."

That was most likely true, thought The Man. Kopil probably had an elaborate seventy-five step plan, probably involving plutonium and other rare metals that the UN had resolved to never ever ever let him get his hands on, for getting Skittles out of a vending machine without paying for them. Of course, what with the cost of plutonium, it would be cheaper to pay the dollar-fifty. But not as elaborate, and with Kopil, everything needed to be elaborate.

"What he did tell me," intoned Griffin, "Was that I was to pose as a butler, learn the basic layout of the White House, and get close enough to the President to be able to strike when the time was right. All I need is the time and a gun. No grappling hook, no uranium, no green M&M's for my dressing room. Just supply me with a handgun and the time when you wish to carry the assassination out, and I will do it faster than you can say 'bang'." Griffin had learned that stuck-up rockers liked green M&M's in their dressing rooms from a People magazine in that horrid Kidz Fun Zone. He was proud of himself for using his first American pop culture reference. He would fit in quite well, he decided.

The Man admired Griffin's intensity. "That you shall get. And this phone," he said, sliding a cell phone across the table to Griffin. "We'll call you when it's time. And a ride to the White House as well. It would be a shame if we lost the nation's premier child spy to a pedophilic hobo on your way to Pennsylvania Avenue." Which was quite true, although a pedophilic hobo would be more likely to successfully molest an armored truck.

Griffin stared back at The Man, evenly. "I should like to walk. It is good for the lungs."

"Maybe in Albania, where people are too busy worrying about getting blown up by land mines to pollute. But here it's different. The air here is about as pleasant for the lungs as tar."

Griffin just nodded.

"Anything else that you need? I assume you will be a competent butler, and the gun will be easy to get to you. But seeing as I've spent ten years here waiting for this moment, one would think that I'd know a great deal about everything around this city."

Griffin stared at the empty ketchup bottle for a while, pondering something. Then he flicked his head back up and stared at The Man, in a moment of hesitation, like when one is wondering whether or not one should ask one's boss for a promotion after the boss has consumed a large amount of alcohol and fired seven people already that morning. But eventually, Griffin averted his gaze to the wall and asked: "Is there anything I need to know about the Secret Service? I'm not expecting any problems, of course, but—"

The Man tried to give Griffin a serious stare, but Griffin was staring at the wall, so The Man did also, hoping some of his intensity would ricochet off the wall onto Griffin. Unfortunately, it missed and hit the waitress, who immediately smacked one of the interns in the head with her poetry book for staring too conspicuously at her shapely posterior. The Man decided just to go ahead. "Griffin," he deadpanned, "The Secret Service is the one competent security branch in the United States. The TSA? Lackadaisical at best. The FBI? Bumbling idiots. The CIA? Worthless people, not even trying. But the Secret Service can, and will, find you out and take you out better than anything you could have encountered in practice missions. But you have one thing on your side."

"Who." It wasn't a question, more of a demand.

"The President."

"I'm trying to assassinate this man, and you're telling me he's somehow on my side?" Griffin gave The Man a strange look, the kind an extremely insensitive person would give someone who was mentally disabled.

The Man smiled smugly. "Of course he's not trying to help you, but he's so stupid that he will, unwittingly. All you need is to get this guy away from the Secret Service, and that will be plenty easy. You could dangle money on a string in front of him and he'd follow you wherever. Or a hooker. Or a donut. He's that stupid."

If he could survive waterboarding and not give up the location of the forbidden Triscuits, thought Griffin, then he could most certainly assassinate a grade-A idiot.

## 6

*I need to get on the treadmill sometime*, thought President David Carr, peering down at a ketchup stain on his noticeable paunch. At 260 pounds, he was nowhere near the lean, mean fighting machine that he was in the good ol' days. Ever since those damn people in the Middle East started shooting each other (could they just get along for ONE SECOND so that he could get on the treadmill?), it was one hot dog or Snickers bar after another to relieve the stress. The portraits of various Presidents (whom, to Carr, looked like someone had stuck poles up their presidential asses) stared at him reproachfully. Carr gave them the finger.

Anne Waters, special counsel and assistant to the Commander in Chief, was forty-two going on seventy, judging by the number of gray hairs on her head. Before she took this job, people had compared her to Thandie Newton. Now they compared her to Whoopie Goldberg. Anne felt a sudden urge to yell at a paper cutout of Elizabeth Hasselbeck. She wondered what to expect from the President next. Just two hours ago he had summoned her in asking her what the large red button on his desk meant, the 'Nuclear Strike Button' label having been obscured by sticky notes featuring phone numbers for various escort services. But this was a much more important matter—another terrorist attack in an airport (these terrorists obviously had an airport fetish)—that required the President's full attention, and she'd be damned if she would let him be distracted by a bee or a political march or even a nuclear strike.

As Carr saw Anne fling the door open, he immediately tucked his Playboy magazine under the desk and went to looking busy on the computer. What did that woman want *now*? "Uh, hey, Anne," he said nervously, like a child who has broken an expensive vase and is trying to make the parent calm enough so that the emergency exit plan would not have to go into effect when the broken vase was revealed.

Anne sighed. No work was being done, and she knew it. "Mr. President, what HAVE you been doing?"

Carr straightened up pompously, trying to look important. "Well, I'm, ah, conducting correspondence with a prominent member of a war-torn African country who needs some place to safeguard his funds after an ancient civil war. Do you know my bank account number offhand?" He turned his computer to show her the email. He felt

no need to let Anne know that he had SEXY BONDAGE ASS BABES XXX open in another window.

Anne knew all about SEXY BONDAGE ASS BABES XXX. Ever since Clinton, the Secret Service had a web monitor on the President's computer. Anne kept installing parental control software to keep President Carr from visiting these sites, but—to her amazement—the man who needed constant reminding about what exactly the economy was and why it was important could find his way past the most state-of-the-art censoring software. However, Anne didn't know that he was getting all of these scam emails, let alone taking them seriously. That would explain why all the US debt was in foreign countries...

She looked angry, noted President Carr. He hoped she didn't know about SEXY BONDAGE ASS BABES XXX. When she got angry, she'd yell at him—really loud. You got no respect as commander in chief. "What?" he whimpered. "You're the one who's always saying we should reach out to people in other countries."

Anne shook her head. *Do not be deterred. Stay the course. Get your message across and make sure he understands.* "Sir," she said slowly and clearly, enunciating every word, "There was an attack on Washington Dulles International Airport."

"Mm-hmm." Carr was once again fixated to his computer screen.

"It was an obvious terrorist attack," she continued, pausing for dramatic effect, which was lost on Carr. A lot of things were lost on Carr. "There were three officers killed."

Carr looked up at her, annoyed. "Three officers? You gotta be kidding me. Anne, three officers were probably killed in a Mob fight in New York today. You want me to care about them too? You want me to just make a memorial for everyone who's ever died?"

"You may be thinking of cemeteries, Sir," said Anne patiently. "Or the war memorials just down the road?"

"Yeah, those. Put their names in that memorial. Was that all?"

"They weren't in a war, sir."

"Make one up. The Dulles War. Never liked that airport. Too many lines."

"Don't tell the press."

"Anne, I am the Commander in Chief. I have nuclear missiles. I can do whatever the hell I please."

Anne sighed. "Sir, we'd like you to give an address about this at a press conference. The media is waiting for you, and—"

Carr cut her off with a long, dramatic sigh. "And for how long will this function require my presence?"

Anne wheeled and dealed in her head for a second. "Ten minutes. But that's only if you don't use your phone during it."

"What about if it rings?"

"Turn it off."

President Carr sighed like a PETA activist in front of a burger joint. "But what if I get an important call?"

Anne knew the President's definition of important—a woman. This man had made indecent proposals to the Queen of England, for Christ's sake. "This is *more* important, Sir. I assure you."

President Carr cocked his head. "Uh, Anne, I recall being the one with a sign on my desk that has the word 'President' on it." He pointed to his sign, which, sure enough, said "President David Carr".

Anne wanted so desperately to point out that her own desk's sign said: "Anne Walton, Special Advisor and Counsel to the President", but she reasoned that if the President showed up at the press conference pouting, things would not be so well. "Yes Sir," she said, in mock defeat.

"Good," Carr said, nodding. At least *someone* respected him around here. "Now repeat after me: I am the decider."

"I am the decider," Anne repeated dutifully.

"Not you. Me. I am the decider. Like of which phone calls are important and which calls aren't."

Anne made a note to herself to tell the Secret Service that they should disconnect the President's phone for the next half hour. "Mr. President, every major news organization is on the White House lawn."

"Ah, let them eat grass."

"*SIR.*"

"OK, OK, jeez! Give me five more minutes."

"Five. No more."

Anne walked out, feeling too exhausted to celebrate her small victory. She grabbed the doorknob, carefully almost closing it so that there was enough room to hear through—but not so that she could be discovered. She crouched like the paparazzi trying to hide in a hedge from Britney Spears' bodyguards, and put her head to the door. She heard some very un-presidential like groaning, and elated cries of "Bad Girl. Oh, you bad girl." She squeezed her eyes tight, trying not to picture the Oval Office. She made the sign of the cross and resolved to bathe herself in holy water after this presidency was over. She would become Catholic, and Protestant, and Jewish, and Muslim, and she would pray to Kami the rain god every Thursday as well.

An intern walking past glanced at the President's special advisor crouched down, praying, in front of the Oval Office. He guessed it was true that working for this guy made you nuts. But damn did it ever look good on a graduate school application.

The White House Lawn was an orgy of murmuring, bloodthirsty news reporters. The striking contrast of black cameras on white news vans was almost blinding, and the eager reporters looked like schoolchildren with a substitute, waiting to see what tricks the class clown would play. There was no telling when President Carr would make a gaffe that would forever be immortalized on t-shirts, presidential countdown calendars, walls of shame, blooper reels, and its own TV series on Comedy Central. Even a reporter from the Playboy Channel was there, which made all the male cameramen instantly swivel their cameras. It was a lucky day for every guy in a high school civics class that happened to be watching CNN. Viewership of all major news networks instantly went up by 200 percent.

"Hey, you!" President Carr had appeared out of nowhere—no one had noticed, not even the Playboy Channel correspondent. "C'mon up here," he called, gesturing to the Playboy Channel reporter, whose low-cut shirt displayed her voluminous cleavage. "Get a better view. I've always been in support of helping smaller businesses...channels, y'know....that don't get as much, uh....coverage."

The FCC went gasped, and President Carr's approval rating among women dropped a point. Half the viewers couldn't believe he would say something so offensive,

and half of them couldn't believe that he was THAT clever. In fact, it had been a complete accident.

Then, unaware that the microphone was turned on and broadcasting his voice to the crowd like a loud and staticky blog, he turned to the Secret Service Agent next to him, laid a confiding hand on his shoulder, and whispered, "But what I really want is a better view of her humongous t--," at which point Anne lunged at the microphone and yanked it away from the President.

The FCC went berserk, and President Carr's approval rating among women dropped seven points. Anne buried her head in her hands.

"Was that on?" he asked, wide-eyed. He had no idea what to do. He was sure that he was going to fall into a deep dark whole where Katie Couric would carve him with a spork and serve him-- flambé! -- To Wolf Blitzer. President Carr wanted nothing more than to turn back the clock and not have said that, then hide in his room and eat nothing but marshmallows until the public forgot he was in there or he forgot the public was out there. But Anne would never let him do it. Damn that woman! But he needed her. Without her, he would flounder like a white guy in a breakdancing competition. He looked over at her. She looked murderous. Bad sign.

*Stay the course, Anne thought. Remember why you're here.* She got up, squeezed her way past Vice President Phillips, and grabbed the President by his shirt collar, jerking his head away from the microphone. She put her lips to his ear and whispered, "Talk about the attack."

It took Carr a while to remember what Anne was talking about. "Oh! Right!" He turned to address the crowd in his best regretful voice. "My fellow Americans and non-Americans," he said, because Anne had emphasized political correctness today, as well as every day before that. "It has come to my attention that there was an attack on Dulles airport. And that's....that's too bad." He looked to Anne for help. She was looking back at him, waving her hands like a crazy person. It seemed to President Carr that she was telling him to merge at the next left. Of course, he had no idea why she would tell him that. Sign language had been one of the many things President Carr had not been able to learn, so he decided he would wing it. "So, look, I wish I could have prevented this, right? But it came as a surprise, so we weren't able to stop it. But I can assure you

that the FBI or the TSA or whoever the hell does it will hunt them down and arrest them. Or try to.”

Anne decided that that had been quite enough of President Carr. She shot up, breezed past Vice President Phillips, and stepped in front of President Carr, stonily ignoring his protests and futile attempts to get his position at the microphone back. Short of dropping his pants then and there, Anne thought, he’d make less of a fool of himself behind the microphone than in front of it. “That concludes the President’s address. We will not be taking any questions.”

Naturally, the reporters pressed forward, buzzing with more questions than a colony of Curious George clones. One lady, a petite, red-haired woman who looked like a squirrel with a black pantsuit, shoved aside the FOX news cameraman and held out a tape recorder, like any stereotypical news reporter. “Mr. President,” she said, in an unnaturally deep voice with the hint of someone who either smoked too many cigarettes or lived in Boston too long, “Brenda Sands from the Globe. How are you feeling about your recent assassination attempt?”

The President had been walking down the street and heard what had appeared to have been a firecracker go off. Then the Secret Service had started diving everywhere like Flipper the dolphin times fifteen and armed with Uzis, and President Carr had realized that someone had just tried to shoot him. He decided that, as President, he would give his opinion on this, even if he was not properly sure of the facts of the matter or the consequences of what he said—then again, he never was. Anne was certainly not fit to answer that question—she didn’t know what it was like to realize that someone was trying to shoot you when you thought they were just setting off ill-timed fireworks. He placed a hand on her shoulder and steered her away from the microphone. “I feel fine,” he said smugly, grinning with an ‘It’s-All-Good’ air at the squirrel in a pantsuit. “I mean, it happened to JFK, and look where he is now!”

Anne knew that there was no way she could get to Carr and make him shut up or at least realize that when people die, they don’t wake up, so she tapped on the shoulder of Nash, the wannabee-badass Secret Serviceman who had shaved his head to look like Vin Diesel. “Will you tell the President that JFK’s dead?” she asked him exasperatedly.

Nash had been waiting for this. He pushed Vice President Phillips aside, and, trying his best to look important and stealthy, leaned down to President Carr and put on his best I-am-a-government-agent-and-I-have-to-tell-the-president-something-very-important look and, aware that this was being televised to the world, stage-whispered, enunciating like his fifth grade teacher had taught him, "JFK's dead, Sir."

The President glared at Nash, wondering when the secret service had hired Captian Obvious. He didn't know much, but he knew that JFK was as dead as jazz. "Exactly!" he bellowed jubilantly into the microphone. "He's in heaven, where you can fly, and everything comes with fries and a Viagra pill, and there are naked women EVERYWHERE!"

The FCC spontaneously combusted and President Carr's approval rating among women dropped into the negative numbers. The pope, astonished that the President would even *think* about getting into heaven in light of his earlier comments, declared that every American to enter Vatican City must have an exorcism performed on them first.

Since everyone was either throwing things at Carr or ogling the Playboy reporter, no one noticed the black car with racing stripes pull into the White House servant parking lot.

## Z

Griffin got out of the passenger door of the car, looking the White House over. Large building, maybe 55,000 square feet. Security cameras everywhere. Many doors, and most likely a hoard of secret passageways that would be easy to infiltrate. Griffin turned his head and his attention to the man he'd have to kill, who was currently being pelted by the shoes of various female reporters. The Man must not be the only one who wants my job, Griffin mused.

The Man saw Griffin examining the President and gave a wry smile. "Don't look," he said. "It's not suitable for children."

The Man opened the trunk and tossed Griffin a small duffel bag, which was loosely packed with soft, loose objects that through the fabric Griffin identified as clothes. They strode across the asphalt to a door in the side of the building. A plaque engraved in large gold script reading 'Servant's Entrance' was juxtaposed with the grimy, mold-covered old door that looked to Griffin to be the only thing the cleaners ever missed.

Griffin started to wrap his hand around the grungy doorknob when he saw a security keypad directly to the left of his hand. "Are we meant to type in a code?" he asked The Man.

The Man had overlooked this detail. He didn't want to admit it, but he had no idea what you were supposed to type there. He blinked, then asked Griffin: "Can you hack into that thing?"

Griffin nodded furiously and set to work trying to wrest the top cover off the keypad to get at the wires underneath. He had already got it halfway off when the door swung open. Griffin, whose reflexes were finer-tuned than the 1964 Fender Stratocaster of a guitar aficionado, jerked his face away from the door just in time to avoid being hit in the face with the doorknob.

The door creaked on its hinges as the man who had exited let it swing closed. He was a smartly-dressed, balding man with a frown emblazoned on his face, and he carried a package of cigarettes and an expensive-looking lighter. He gave a perturbed look at The Man and Griffin, which Griffin interpreted to mean *you have interrupted my smoking break. Now you must die.*

Luckily, he didn't seem to notice that this very large man and this stealthy-looking teenager were tampering with the keypad. He squinted at them, and then, in a drawling British accent, asked: "Who the bloody hell are you?"

Griffin disliked this man. Then again, there was hardly anyone he didn't dislike. But this man was different—he had a superior air around him, and the way he curled his lip up while finishing the word 'you' made Griffin want to grab him by the lapels of his impeccably pressed suit, throw him against the wall, and tell him that he was a highly trained foreign agent and could kill him in thirteen seconds using only his pinky fingers and a Big Bird plush doll. He looked at The Man for guidance, but for once The Man knew exactly what he was doing.

"Teenage butler that the President requested," The Man barked in an almost convincing American accent, squeezing Griffin's shoulder like a stress ball.

The Snotty British Man (which was Griffin's code name for this man for the time being) wrinkled his nose and examined Griffin top to bottom, making disappointed noises. "Another teenager," he drawled. "Bloody hell. Can't be trusted, if you ask me. But I suppose what the President wants..."

"The President gets," said The Man dryly. He pushed the heel of his hand into Griffin's shoulder blades, and Griffin let the force propel him to the door. Without looking at Griffin—the cardinal rule in espionage: never acknowledge other agents—he strode off to the car. If he drove fast he still might catch Gossip Girl.

The Snotty British Man put the cigarette in his mouth and held it with his lips, flicking the lighter with his thumb. The flame shot up and quivered mildly from side to side in the breeze. The Snotty British man lit the cigarette, then inhaled deeply, looking much more relaxed. The old scowl returned almost immediately, though, and Griffin concluded that serenity was not The Snotty British Man's default setting.

Griffin decided that he was going to follow protocol and not speak until he was spoken to. He stared blankly out at the cars. He had learned how to survive boredom, and if The Snotty British Man wanted to stay here the rest of the week, Griffin had no problem with that.

The Snotty British Man took the cigarette out of his mouth and finally spoke. "I am James," he said flatly. "I am the head butler at the White House and I suppose I

must waste my time by giving you an orientation. First of all, you will do what I say, is that clear?"

Griffin nodded.

"Second, You are working for possibly the most powerful, albeit one of the least skilled, men in the world. I expect you to conduct yourself in a manner worthy of such an honor."

Griffin nodded. Griffin didn't think much was funny, but having James tell him how to act in front of the man he was going to kill eventually had a morbid irony to it.

"Third, this job requires completing a hoard of menial tasks. You will do each one diligently and efficiently."

Griffin nodded again. Diligence and efficiency would have been his middle names, but The Man refused to fill out a birth certificate for him, because, as far as the government knew, he didn't technically exist.

James inhaled more smoke. He was now more bored than the average calculus student. The other teenage butler, while admittedly infuriating, was not quite as dull. James didn't know which was worse. "What's your name?" he drawled indifferently.

"Griffin Peshk."

James straightened to his full height and stared daggers at the menacing-looking child. "What did you just say to me?" he asked haughtily. He knew in the back of his mind that Griffin might be a bad person to confront, but his rampant desire to maintain superiority overtook that thought like an inspirational indie in an Oscar race.

Griffin had no idea what he'd said wrong. Frankly, his opinion was that even if he offered to shine James' shoes and give him a back rub, James would look at him like one looks at a street urchin or Mickey Rourke. "That's my *name*," he intoned, desperate not to lose his cool.

The other butler was named Layland. This one was named Friggin' Pest. There was a kid named Superman, for chrissakes. James shook his head and spat authoritatively to the ground. When were young people going to start making sense, giving their children proper names like James or George or Mary or James, and throw that whore Britney Spears out the window once and for all?

Griffin held his tongue. He could write a book on what to say to this man, and if the whole judging committee for the National Book Award knew this cantankerous,

stuck-up Brit, he would win it. But he shut up and amused himself by wondering whether he would be able to shoot James after finishing with the President.

James saw the damnable teenager smiling sweetly and wondered what the hell he was doing. Probably picturing him naked, that was all that children *did* these days, after all. James dropped the cigarette. It fell to the ground and began to roll, but James caught it with the heel of his shoe and ground it fiercely into the cement. "Right then," he said in the general direction of Griffin, who was giving off such a blank stare that James surmised he could run a car into Griffin, and the child would still stare ahead blankly. Of course, that was what people tended to do when they were dead, which tended to be the result of running a car into someone. James decided he needed to work on his theories.

James opened the door and stepped in, letting it start to shut on Griffin. *Well, I'm not going to hold the bloody door for him*, thought James. Griffin didn't seem the least bit put off by this; he simply stepped through the crack and strode down the hall after James.

"I really don't feel like wasting my time giving you some sort of orientation," said James, "So I'll let your roommate do it. He's your age. If you're a despicable enough human being, you'll enjoy his company."

Griffin was not pleased by this. It wasn't that he minded getting rid of that wretched man, but from his horrible experiences in the Kidz Fun Zone, he did not want to share a room with one of his own kind unless an alternative was absolutely impossible. He sighed inside his head. *SHOW NO WEAKNESS!* Barked Sir's voice.

James lazily flopped his hand in the general direction of a door, which Griffin assumed he was meant to go through, then stalked off. Griffin scanned the walls of the hallway before entering the room, which looked like a low-rent hotel room without a TV. Two queen-sized beds were off to one wall, a door led to a bathroom on the other. Griffin tossed his suitcase on the bed that didn't already have an obscenely large pile of clothes on it, then did an intensive sweep of the room for bugs. He tested the bathroom tap and shower water for drugs or chemicals, looked for hidden cameras, and searched for weapons of any kind. He did not find any weapons. He did, however, find many candy bars under the bed with a pile of clothes on it. He took two and ate one to keep his energy up. The other one, he figured, could be a bargaining chip, sort of like a

first round draft pick or the position of Secretary of Commerce. He decided that a rest might be the sort of thing to keep his head clear so that he could take in his surroundings best when he woke up. He organized himself on the bed and stared straight up towards the ceiling and felt his eyelids drooping. He fought everything, but he wasn't about to fight sleep.

## 8

Generally, people do not enjoy being prodded incessantly by someone they have never met. Griffin was one of those people. From the first poke, his reflexes were ready to deliver a lightning strike to the windpipe of whoever was dishing out the interminable annoyance. Griffin's eyes flashed open, revealing another teenager looming over him.

*DAMN!*

Layland figured that the guy was mad at him. But seriously, it was just a poke. If he had lit the guy on fire, yeah, he should get mad. But he was just *poking* him. So he would wake *up*. Seriously. "What's up?" he asked. The guy had shifted quickly to a sitting position and looked like an angry talk show host ready to strike. Layland backed off, holding up his hands as if to ward off a blow or shoo away a door-to-door yacht insurance salesman. "Hey, take it easy, man. Sorry about the poking thing and all that, y'know, stuff."

It wasn't quite a literate sentence, but to Griffin it seemed better than OMG LOL UR SO FUNY. "Who are you?" he barked. You could never trust anyone. He could be a field agent for the other side. Griffin suspected that that was just what this illiterate ape had to be—he certainly couldn't be anyone higher up, making phone calls to heads of state to negotiate weapons treaties. Norway would have been obliterated by now.

"I'm Layland," said Layland, grinning. This guy didn't seem very happy. Layland figured that if you weren't happy, you might as well be James. Screw morals, screw virtue, and he was toying with the possibility of screwing love, too. After meeting James, Layland decided that the Good Lord had given him the gift of not being a humongous asshole and by God he was going to use it. "What's yours?"

"Griffin Peshk."

Layland put up his no-I-don't-want-to-get-hit-or-buy-yacht-insurance hands again. "Hey, man, don't have to get mad at me. I just asked you a question."

Griffin cursed his blasted parents for giving him that name. Or maybe the academy did. Griffin never knew his parents, but they must have existed so that they could sell him to the Defense Agency for a land mine. *ONE* land mine. If they knew what he was doing now, they would have asked for at least three. It seems that this abomination standing in front of him with his tie hanging loosely around his neck—*it*

*goes in the shirt collar, jackass*—inherited the stupidity gene that he had not received from his incompetent creators.

“Oh, by the way, did James tell you? You slept through breakfast and we’re supposed to be serving hors d’oeuvres at the Vice President’s mother’s birthday party...umm...” Layland pulled up the sleeve of his blazer, looked at his watch, cursed under his breath, smacked his lips, and said, “...fifteen minutes ago. C’mon, let’s get you some breakfast.”

Something about ‘We were supposed to be serving hors d’oeuvres fifteen minutes ago,’ and ‘C’mon, let’s get you some breakfast,’ did not add up in Griffin’s mind, which was actually quite adept at processing. As far as Griffin was concerned, this Layland person was apparently not adept at spitting out something processable. “If we’re to be serving hors d’oeuvres right now,” Griffin said, rolling his eyes, “Then certainly breakfast is out of the question.”

“It’s the most important meal of the day, man! At least have a pop tart.”

“We have work. I can eat later.”

“Aw, it’ll take you just five minutes to eat. We’re already late, James is already gonna be mad.”

It was one thing to fail at your mission while running at the President, guns blazing, and being shot down by secret servicemen. It was another thing completely to fail at your mission by getting tossed out on your ass by the snotty head butler because you were twenty minutes late to serve hors d’oeuvres. “*No.*” said Griffin, flatly and authoritatively.

“C’mon. I got some candy bars; you can eat ‘em on the way there. What kind you like?”

“I don’t care.”

“Oh, c’mon, you gotta like one more than the others.”

Griffin had already been through this with The Man and frankly did not care to repeat it. “I don’t care about much. I am deeply committed to work and would rather not let trivial things such as eating get in the way.”

“Fine,” said Layland. “Suit yourself. *Prick,*” he muttered, as he lifted the bed covers and gazed at his stash of candy bars. He emerged with two Milky Ways, tossing one to Griffin. “I’m telling you, man,” he said, his arms flying like bras on a clothesline in

a hurricane, "Who. Cares. About. Work. Live a little, man. This is the place to do it. The WHITE HOUSE, man. It's got a friggin' bowling alley. A BOWLING ALLEY. Everyone's saying these years are supposed to be the best years of our lives, anyway."

To Griffin, the word "best" was automatically associated with successfully completing tasks, so if he did managed to kill Carr, his teenage years would indeed be the "best" years of his life. Therefore, he was not going to waste them doing trivial things like going to bowling alleys and 'living a little, man.'

"We need to get to the party," intoned Griffin, marching out the door.

"Jeez," muttered Layland, rolling his eyes like a frustrated teenager, which was what he was. Why did this guy have to be such a jerk? There were tons of better things to do—like seeing if they could get one of those Secret Service guys to laugh, or making James as mad as possible. But whatever, this guy seemed hell-bent on getting to that party, and Layland didn't want to get in a fight with the new guy on his first day.

Vice President Phillips was in such high spirits that he frankly didn't care that the hors d'oeuvres weren't being served. He was so happy because, though he was drafted to become Vice-President simply because he was the more photogenic of the two congressmen who were not cheating on their wives, taking bribes from lobbyists, or dealing with gambling addictions, he was the successor to a man who The New York Times said was so hated he would receive posthumous death threats. While Vice President Phillips wished President Carr no ill will, he wanted to live in the White House and work in the Oval Office instead of flying around in Air Force Two to halfheartedly provide a half-hour of background noise to texting high school students.

James, however, did care that the hors d'oeuvres were not being served. He had had a bad day, beginning in the early morning when he had woken up and hit his head on a bedpost. He was stomping around the elaborately furnished room, searching for someone to carry the trays of caviar sandwiches. The Prime Minister of Swaziland should not have to serve *himself* food! This was the kind of injustice that made countries manufacture nuclear missiles to make Americans sweat. Then, America pay them to disband a nuclear program that really consisted of a metal tube with ominous markings on it that had been photographed with a Kodak digital camera and sent to CNN, FOX, ABC, NBC, ESPN, and the Playboy Network, which was getting more famous by the minute after the incident at the press conference. It was a lucrative business.

Griffin strode into the room with a determined air, spotting the serving trays and determining how many he could balance at one time. Layland hastily followed, shouting random apologies at no one in particular. He reluctantly selected a tray that looked the lightest and had just curled his fingers around one of the caviar sandwiches to test it, James' not-so-massive-but-very-very-angry form loomed over him.

"You're eighteen minutes late," said James disdainfully.

"Sir, yes sir! Sorry sir! We'll get right on it, sir!" recited Griffin, jumping to attention and saluting.

Layland didn't get why this guy was just *saluting* James after James had been yelling at them—after all, they were only eighteen minutes late! And they were helping him! At the battle of Yorktown, after Washington had driven the British to the end of the Chesapeake Bay and the French showed up, did he say '*You're eighteen minutes late?*' No! He said '*Thank you for saving my sorry ass, even though you people never eat anything but baguettes.*'

*Maybe this new Friggin' Pest character would be a good influence,* thought James. *Or at least he'd be more productive.* With a stern air, James straightened up. "Well now! Get to work. Chop-chop!" Then he slunk away, muttering, "At least you weren't playing Pac-Man on the Sudanese Dictator's Blackberry."

"Why would he think we'd be doing that?" asked Griffin.

Layland scratched the back of his neck, seemingly eager to change the subject. "Hey...hey, look, there's...there's Jay Leno! Do they have people like that back where...wherever you come from?"

*Well,* thought Griffin, *he's not so stupid that he hasn't picked up on my accent.* Griffin had decided to give up the fake American accent the minute he set foot outside the bedroom. He doubted anyone would notice. "Where I come from," deadpanned Griffin, "If we had something like THAT, we would take it out into the street and shoot it."

Layland was not about to stick around for the hate speech. He stalked off, carrying a tray with one hand in a careless manner such that caviar sandwiches slid off the silver tray onto the fresh Oriental rug. He was, of course oblivious to this; he was too busy trying to get Jay Leno to sign his shirt with a cheap pen that said *Smoking makes your lungs black.*

James had finished berating, firing, and thoroughly insulting a cook who had undercooked the smoked salmon, and scanned the room like a stereotypical third-grade-teaching old lady in a floral print dress sweeping the room with her eyes to see if there were any note-passing students whose desks she could hit with her yardstick. The new butler, Friggin' Pest, was balancing three trays on one arm and shaking Jack Nicholson's hand with a practiced courtesy. Across the room, Layland, holding a tray so limply that it was perpendicular to the ground and had all manner of spilled appetizers piled beneath it, was holding out a pen and a shirtsleeve to—was that *Jay Leno*? How the hell had he gotten in? James would find the person who made the guest list and extract revenge like a 50-year-old action film star who was too old for the studio to make a plausible scenario for his character's joining the army and so instead signed onto a film where his picturesque suburban screen family got killed and he ran around, looking badass and point-blank shooting mindless thugs who had no idea that when the kidnapped that family they would face the vengeance of a 50-year-old man jacked up on Viagra.

Griffin had decided that this job lacked excitement. Layland had mentioned some strange and quite possibly illegal things they should do, and Griffin knew it wasn't professional but was nonetheless intrigued. It was, after all, a break from random weeklong fasts and exhausting obstacle courses. But he was still working, he reminded himself, as he stood passively next to Jay Leno, who was now taking hors d'oeuvres and inserting them into his mouth so robotically that Griffin feared that if he took the tray away, Leno would spontaneously combust.

After a while, Jay Leno spotted a junior congressman who had yet to learn that the best thing to do when invited to a minor party from the White House was to politely decline through your executive assistant, and went over to tell a joke. Griffin had heard him tell so many jokes as he mindlessly scooped caviar sandwiches off Griffin's silver tray that Griffin felt that even if Al Qaeda took Jay Leno hostage, he would be telling them jokes at gunpoint on the flight over to Saudi Arabia.

Griffin marched professionally back to the kitchen to replenish his tray of expensive, bland munchies and arrived there at the same time as Layland, who was replacing the crab cakes he had dropped on the floor. "Liking this so far?" Layland chirped, like an annoying cell phone that goes off when you're trying to get some work done. Griffin searched for a nondescript answer that would package his professionalism,

his utter boredom and his perpetual nonchalance all in one, and settled on the popular American colloquialism, "whatever".

Layland was pleased. Everyone in the White House could speak English, but he had yet to find a staff member who could speak American Teen. "Sweet," he said, countering the ambiguous 'whatever' with some ambiguity of his own, because he had no idea what the hell they were talking about anymore. "So, you wanna just chill for awhile? James'll never catch us, and Jay Leno can get his own damn caviar, it won't kill him."

Griffin did relish the thought of Jay Leno getting his own damn caviar, but he had a job to do and it was his duty to do it. He was about to pick up his tray and walk away when James bore down reproachfully on the pair like a redneck on an African-American lesbian feminist vegetarian atheist Democrat. "What the *hell* do you think you're doing?" Griffin attempted to answer, but James wasn't finished. "Well, you're bloody well not making yourselves useful! If you're too good to serve caviar, go wish the Vice President's mother a happy birthday!"

James walked away sputtering. Those good-for-nothing layabouts that were employed under him were getting on his last nerve! All they did was yak yak yak all the time. As far as James was concerned, they should go on the train straight back to Mexico. And the teenagers were even worse! He had no idea how the president had come up with his idea for a 'hired help for less' program.

On the other side of the room, Anne swiftly marched over to President Carr, who was laughing uproariously at one of Jay Leno's jokes, and offered her default greeting of: "Sir, there seems to be a problem with—", to which President Carr responded with his default "Invade them and get the hell out of my face," to which Jay Leno made another dumb joke, which resulted in his being dragged over to the other side of the room by Nash, who really would prefer to do an interrogation with brass knuckles and car batteries and everything, but was content with dragging Jay Leno across the room and looking as badass as you can look while dragging Jay Leno across a room.

"Mr. President," said Anne, trying to restart things on the right foot, or at least some sort of footing at all, "The child advocate groups have a problem with your 'hired help for less' program."

"Anne," sighed the President, shaking his head like a man trying to explain to his wife that *Dammit, Margaret, our twelve-year-old son no longer believes that babies come from a stork! Now are you gonna talk to him about sex or should I?*" "Do you listen? I told you to tell them that as long as I am president, those canaries are staying in the coal mines and they are *not coming out.*"

"Sir," sighed Anne, shaking her head like a woman trying to explain to her husband that *Larry, I don't care if he believes babies come from a kangaroo, I just think it's inappropriate for you to leave your Playboy magazines lying around in the bathroom where he can see them!*" "You may be thinking of PETA. The ones that like animals and want to let them rule the world? But here we've got the child advocate groups that fight for children's rights, and they see your teenage butler system as child labor."

"It's not labor if they don't get paid. They're volunteering."

"That may be considered slavery by people who would want to shove something like this up your ass. And what do you mean, they don't get paid? This is, after all, called the 'hired help for less plan', not 'hired help for nothing' plan."

"Look, look, look," said President Carr, shaking his head. "If they want to put up a stink, let 'em put up a stink. I'll take care of this."

He whipped out his Toshiba phone—a word he was very fond of saying (Toshiba Toshiba Toshiba), but Anne did not approve of his reciting it repetitively in public. Go figure. He punched speed dial number three—one was Papa John's, two was an 'escort service'—and tapped his foot irritably as he waited for someone to pick up on the other line.

Across the room, Nash had deposited Jay Leno near the bar, where he decided that the comedian could drink until he was drunk enough for Nash to have a reason to throw him off the premises. His cell phone vibrated in his pocket, and he fumbled with it like it was a hot potato and he was a guy on a sitcom who was unlucky enough not to be wearing oven mitts. "Hello?" he whispered in his raspiest, most professional Secret Service voice.

"Who is this?" asked Carr.

"Frankfurter? This is the secret service. Nash speaking. Are you all right?"

"I'm across the room, you idiot," said President Carr, who was quite irritated because he thought the number was that of a lawyer he had seen on TV. But maybe

Nash could solve his problem too. "Hey, Nash. Would you mind taking some people out for me?"

"What?" hissed Anne. She dove at the phone, clawing for it, put President Carr stuck a meaty hand in her face and held her back at arm's length.

"No problem, sir!" said Nash as professionally as he could. "Do you out of the party, or out of...the living?"

"I mean kill them," said Carr, mentally adding *duh*. "Child advocates. Just—" But then he began to reconsider. He was going to kill these people, he might as well at least show them some hospitality. He would have Nash take the child activists to a movie first—maybe *Slumdog Millionaire*, the one where they took that kid's eyes out with a spoon. It won an Oscar, so it had to be good. Maybe they could--Anne was tugging relentlessly on his suit. *What was that woman DOING?* He wondered. *She's gonna wrinkle it!* "Look," he sighed. "I'm gonna have to call you back. Sorry." He snapped his phone shut.

"Jesus, Anne, I think you're a wonderful assistant and special adviser and whatever the hell you are, but I am *not* going to take my clothes off."

"*Sir,*" sighed Anne, harder than she had ever sighed before, "You can't tell the Secret Service to kill people just because you find them problematic."

President Carr was taken aback. This was his secret service, and he could do what he damn well pleased with them. He felt the need to assert his authority. He tried to physically dwarf Anne, but they were the same height, so he settled with positioning his gut in the most menacing way possibly, then said sternly: "Anne? Are you the decider?"

"No, sir," said Anne, gnashing her teeth.

"That's right," said Carr. "*I* am the decider. And for the record, I think me and that secret service guy had an understanding that my orders were not final."

Nash could hardly contain his glee as he power-walked to the door. A real mission! An assassination! Wow!

Later that night, police arrested a well-built man who looked almost like Vin Diesel trying to sneak into the house of a well-know child advocate with an assault rifle and twenty rounds of ammunition. The man stated that he was on a mission from the president and was with the secret service, but the special assistant and advisor to the

president *herself* denied the President's ever issuing such a command, and furthermore, large amounts of alcohol were found in the car of said secret service agent.

Meanwhile, Griffin and Layland had just finished wishing the dilapidated old hag next to Vice-President Phillips a happy one hundred and second birthday when the side door opened, and, to Griffin, all heaven broke loose.

Griffin had seen pictures of women before, and had encountered a few in the airport, so he felt he had a general idea of what women looked like. But he never expected anyone to look like Veronica Madison Carr. And her smile, when it lingered ever so slightly on Griffin, lit him up like an acetylene torch. Her silky brown hair bounced in its ponytail on her back. She walked regally and determinedly, and it took Griffin a while to realize that she was walking *right toward him*, her entrancing green eyes directed on his face, and Griffin, for the first time in his life, was scared.

*Stop*, he told himself. *You are acting foolish*. He had no desire to turn into one of those texting OMG ROTFLOL short-skirt punk children. He was on a mission and he was not going to be distracted by *Oh my God, she's smiling again*. She walked regally, with double the sexiness of a supermodel and none of the arrogance, up to Layland, who immediately grabbed his tray and stood at attention. Layland thought Veronica was really frickin' hot, but just wanted to be friends with her. The kind of friends that would get it on once and awhile, maybe, but he didn't want to commit or any of that crap.

"Hey there, Miss Veronica," he said, bowing low like an Asian waiter. "Would you like an hors d'oeuvre?" He pronounced it 'horse doover'. Griffin rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, sure!" she said, her harmonious voice gliding across the air, like a feather on ice skates. Griffin had to blink and shake his head—he was starting to get some sort of strange sensation. A spy must always have a clear head, Sir had told him many times.

Her delicate fingers reached for one of the caviar sandwiches and inserted it carefully into her perfectly crafted mouth and gracefully bit into it with her blazing white teeth, which possessed a sheen that almost was blinding—to Griffin, at least.

She swallowed her caviar sandwich. "Who's your friend?" she asked Layland, nodding her head and smiling at Griffin.

"New butler," said Layland. "His name's, um..." Both he and Veronica looked at Griffin expectantly.

Griffin felt that his lips were weighed down by iron and would not permit him to speak. Now he knew how it felt to be that trustworthy-looking man who was paid to stand beside CEOs at their press conferences and not talk. With tremendous effort, he parted his quivering lips and sputtered: "I'm—I'm Griffin. Griffin Peshk." *A spy must speak eloquently*, Sir had constantly lectured him. But Sir was the last thing on Griffin's

mind now. He had forgotten that Sir ever existed. He wished he could turn himself into a louse and explore the depths of Veronica's flowing brown hair, immersing himself in the silky chocolate-colored waves. *A spy should not concern himself with turning into parasites*, he imagined Sir yelling.

"Griffin Peshk?" asked Veronica. Griffin nodded. "That's a really cool name. I like it. Really unique."

Griffin's eyes widened. This girl liked his name! She thought it was *unique*! She had paid him a *compliment*! "Ah, I, uh, thank you," he stammered.

"Listen," she said, flashing a radiant smile, "I need to go hang with the dignitaries, shake hands, make Daddy happy, y'know?" she scanned the room with her brilliant eyes. "Oh my God!" she cried, putting a hand to her mouth. "It's Jay Leno!" She ran over to Jay Leno, her dress bouncing up around her sturdy legs, and Griffin felt a jolt, and then a chill, then a feeling that made him want to jump on her and kiss her and run around the world and kill Genghis Khan and eat five boxes of Triscuits and do it all over again.

After discovering that Jay Leno was not in fact conscious after Nash's attempts to carry out a badass-looking beating knocked him out, Veronica darted over to the president, who was about to ask the foreign minister of some obscure African country to pull his finger, threw her arms around his neck, and planted a loud, wet kiss on the back of his head.

Layland and Griffin watched this from the other side of the room, Griffin's mouth still stupidly hanging slack-jawed like he was Miss Teen South Carolina. "Man," sighed Layland, who did not necessarily like Veronica in THAT WAY but certainly would not be averse to being on the receiving end of any of her kisses.. "Times like this I wish I was fat, bald, dumb, and the President." Griffin just nodded.

The rest of the day passed like a blur. Griffin performed all the menial tasks that were required of him, but he couldn't focus on polishing the door handles or lugging boxes of shredded documents out to the trash—visions of Veronica were dancing in his head like sugarplums, drawing his attention away from the tasks at hand. He didn't even notice that he was so distracted until Layland asked him why the polishing supplies were in the dumpster and the door handles were covered with torn-apart correspondence between President Carr and several people who claimed that he owed them money.

Griffin was only too glad to be dismissed for the day so that he could fantasize about Veronica without any distractions

"So how'd your first day go?" asked Layland in a manner that Griffin found quite distracting. Back in the sparsely furnished room, they were taking off their uniforms. Layland flopped on the bed and looked expectantly at Griffin.

The day had certainly been an experience. It had been refreshing to have an influence that wasn't Sir. Frankly, Griffin didn't like Sir so much. He wanted to test the waters and see what, exactly, was out there. He was intrigued by this idea of 'goofing off', and decided he might like to try it sometime. And then there was Veronica. Griffin wanted to pray to Veronica, he wanted to...he wanted to make her smile. At him. Very badly.

"It was...it was OK," said Griffin, trying to sound nonchalant. Then, he blurted out: "I liked meeting Veronica."

"I could tell, man," said Layland, rolling his eyes. "Dude, you looked like a nine-year-old girl watching the Jonas Brothers."

"Who are the Jonas Brothers?"

"They're a band. They play music."

Griffin knew of music, but only like moviegoers know of Camera B Assistants—he knew that music existed, but he'd never been that interested in learning about it. "Ah, music. Do you have some music?"

"Uh, yeah."

"May I listen to it sometime?"

"Sure. So about Veronica...."

"What?" asked Griffin, his heart going faster than Dale Earnhardt Jr. on the Autobahn.

"You like her, don't you?" asked Layland mischievously, like a teenage girl trying to worm gossip-worthy information out of hapless guys.

"Well...what do you mean, like her?"

"You know...LIKE HER."

"I don't quite know what you mean by 'like' her. What do you mean?"

Layland sighed, like a person watching a Nicholas Cage movie, disappointed and disbelieving. "It's hard to describe, you know...when you like someone, you want to be

around them all the time, and you want to get to know them, and you want them to love you and you want to love them back, and..."

"What do you mean by love?"

Layland made an exasperated noise as he racked his brain for a suitable explanation of love out of the several he'd heard on Oprah. "It's when...when you get near someone and your heart pumps really fast and you know, the whole room melts away and all you see is them, and you're, like, friggin' amazed by everything they do..."

"So...that's love?"

"Yup."

"And can I be in love with Veronica?"

"What are you asking me for? Sure! Go ahead. You two'd be a great couple. I now pronounce you man and wife."

"And how do I get her to be in love with me?"

"Just be nice to her. I dunno, say nice things, hang out with her, tell her jokes, that kinda crap. I'm no love doctor, man."

"Oh, and Layland?"

"Yeah."

"Can you teach me how to do all of this 'fun' stuff you talk about all the time?"

Layland looked perplexed, like a writer who wonders why kids aren't buying his new book: *My Pet Square Root*. "Sure, man. Whatever." He reached for the lightswitch, trying to figure out this weird guy. "Y'know," he said thoughtfully, "You're a much cooler prick than I thought you were."

He hit the switch and the room was plunged into darkness.

Griffin dreamed that that night he saved Veronica from Sir, and then Layland played them some music and taught them to have fun, and then Jay Leno fell out of the sky and crushed James, and then he and Veronica kissed and kissed and kissed and kissed.

## 10

Veronica's riding hat was perched snugly on her head, and her tight riding pants fit snugly around her butt. She bounced up and down on her horse, which she had named Lollipop when she was seven and going through that phase where candy was life's ultimate pleasure. She used to have secret servicemen trotting awkwardly behind her on horses—the secret servicemen were trained in everything but riding—but she had told her father that because you couldn't already walk two feet without hitting a bush with feet and a machine gun, she didn't need an armed horse guard following her, and the president had agreed. Anything for his little girl. As the horse *clip-clopped* toward the stables, she clapped her hands, triggering the automatic stable door. President Carr would have otherwise used this money to build a hospital in North Dakota, but he did not tell Veronica; she would have forbidden it. *Silly girl*, the president would smile to himself and think. *Actually caring about the North Dakotans.*

Inside Lollipop's stable was Griffin, who was there on a hot tip from Layland. "She rides every other day or so on this horse called Lollipop," Layland had told him over a breakfast of donuts—a food that Griffin had never tasted, Sir had forbidden foods high in calories—"It says the horse's name on its stall. Just go in the one that says Lollipop and clean it or something. She'll love you."

Griffin knew instantly why she would love him for cleaning out the damned stall. The floor was entirely blanketed in horse feces and hay. Griffin was finding out quickly that Americans were just as cruel to their horses as they were to their octuplet mothers. Griffin was in the process of tossing the junk into another stall—to hell with all the other horses, Veronica's horse was the only one that really mattered—when Veronica came in and Griffin immediately ceased his shoveling. He had no recollection of how to pick up a shovel. In fact, he had no recollection of what a shovel was. He did, however, notice how tight Veronica's riding pants were.

Veronica was surprised to see Griffin here. Wasn't he that guy who hung out with Layland? Shy, kind of cute...she didn't have many friends here except Layland, and now maybe Griffin. Her father had taken her out of school because there were too many security risks for his daughter, like kids who would spit when they talked. She had a few close girlfriends—the children of Senators and cabinet secretaries—but she hardly got to see them as much as she liked. She'd like to get to know this new guy a little better. He

sounded foreign—it was hard to find any Americans named Griffin Peshk. She spent a lot of her free time with Layland, but she had to admit that he spent too much of his free time staring at her breasts. Depending on his hormones, Griffin might be a welcome change. But what was he doing here? Yeah, he was hired as a butler, but cleaning out the stables was, as far as Veronica knew, not part of the job description.

Griffin decided he would try and keep shoveling to impress Veronica. After all, showing compassion by cleaning the stables and strength at the same time, was, well, it spelled jackpot. He successfully lifted the shovel, plunged it into the mass of putrid horse excrement, and, as he watched Veronica perform a fluid dismount, let it all slip back to the floor of the stall.

Veronica shook her head and smiled. Motioning for Lollipop to stay, she vaulted the wall of the stall. “You’re doing it all wrong,” she said, giggling. “Do it this way.”

She placed her hands on Griffin’s and moved him like a marionette, having him grasp the shovel and plunge it, again, into the depths of reeking horse crap.

Griffin felt dazed. The touch of Veronica’s skin against his made him feel happy, but only because that was the sole word he could think of to describe it. He felt himself swaying, and felt like he was losing control, then, the warmth of Veronica’s hands radiating through him, dropped into the pile of horse droppings.

“Griffin?” he heard, faintly, from above him. “Griffin, are you okay?”

He blinked. He was lying in a pile of horse crap. He had been in worse situations before. His only goal was talking to Veronica and making sure she liked what she saw. He tried to think of a good conversation starter, something to get her lips moving so that her sweet utterings could pervade his brain and force out Sir’s constantly shouted advice.

She heaved a sigh of relief as Griffin stirred. She was glad he was OK...although OK might be a bit of a stretch in his situation. He blinked, then, spread eagle in a large mound of horse feces, looked directly into her eyes and said: “So, what’s your favorite color?”

She burst out laughing. Griffin felt even more amazing than when he’d eaten those forbidden Triscuits. He’d made her *laugh!* Success! He saw her look at him, ready to say something. What was it that Americans said to their beloveds? Wasn’t it

something like 'would you marry me?' Griffin anticipated the question like one anticipates the end of allergy season. "Do you want me to get the hose?" she asked.

She didn't have to get the hose! He was the butler. He was not about to sit back and let her fetch things for him. What if she got her hands dirty on the hose? That wouldn't do. He brushed past her on his way out of the stall, feeling her warmth. However, he left several dark brown streaks smeared across Veronica's clothes, like ex-wives on a presidential candidate's profile.

This guy was really cute, in a really awkward way, and even though she had horse crap on her best riding clothes (her father had spent most of the African orphan aid money on them, unbeknownst to her), she had to giggle. "I may need that when you're done," she said to Griffin. He looked back, his eyes widened, and he began to apologize profusely to the point where Veronica was scared he might try to lick it off. "It's fine," she laughed as Griffin turned on the hose to a mild stream and started bathing her in the freezing spray. "By the way," she said, once he had turned the hose back to himself (only once he was sure that not only was all the horse feces gone, but that it looked like it had gone through the dry cleaners, except without the 'dry' part), "My favorite color's purple."

Purple? Griffin was intrigued. He knew something about her! He had to know more. He began bombarding her with questions, savoring each answer like a convict savors his last meal, until he knew everything he possibly could about this wondrous...goddess? That was the right term, Griffin assured himself. She was nothing less than god-like.

He was so *cute*, asking all these questions, wanting to know about her and what she liked, what she thought, what she did...she wanted to know something about him, but all he had to volunteer was 'nothing', 'I dunno', 'not much', and 'not really'. It seemed to Veronica like he had lived under a rock before coming to the states, or possibly in prison. He looked tough enough to have been in prison. Why would he have gotten arrested? Maybe he was at a protest demonstration or something. A progressive friend, even if he was a bit socially awkward, sounded great.

The agent in charge of Veronica, Krieger, had been standing outside the stable for a while now and was wondering why she was taking so long. He radioed the camera room and asked them if they could tell him what the hell was going on in the stable.

Upon hearing it, he sighed and wished for the seven hundredth time he'd joined the army after college instead of standing guard outside a barn while two adolescents covered in horse poop sat inside talking on hay bales.

"So what have you been doing today?" asked Veronica. If Griffin was going to work so hard at making conversation, it was only fair that she return the effort.

"I had breakfast. Then I came here. Next, I'll probably polish something." Griffin liked being precise with his itineraries.

"Nah, I want you to hang out with me." It was more of a question than a command, but Griffin accepted as if it were an executive order from the president himself.

More people know of the White House Bowling Alley than of the Oval Office, but only a select few are allowed in, because they don't have enough bowling shoes to rent. Of course, Veronica was the President's daughter, so she could use her regular shoes. Even if they mangled the floor, the President would give them some of the defense budget to fix it. The soldiers already had enough protection as it was. Secretary of State Herbert Chen's daughter Helen was bowling with Veronica, as was Senate Majority Leader Mark Kissinger's daughter, Elly. Both girls had been told by their parents that the name of the game was to kiss ass, but, living in Washington, they had had enough ass-kissing by age three and wanted genuine friendship, something that Veronica was in need of as well. She was not about to be used by her father to convince her friends to convince their fathers that selling Wyoming to Iran would help reduce the national debt. She didn't want the stench of dirty politics to hang over her friendships like a bout of very unpleasant flatulence.

But in Washington, you talk about politics or you don't talk at all, so they decided that they would do some bowling, since it required little talking (but much emotional friend support, especially when they decided to stop using the gutters).

Griffin watched from the corner of the room as Veronica nailed a strike. She didn't necessarily have the strongest arm in the world, but she had technique. Her every move kept him in a trance, and every fiber of her being was captivating, so that even if she had no technique whatsoever, Griffin would have come up with some excuse to reassure himself that she was wonderful in all areas of life.

Griffin had to fetch her ball. He wanted to start a conversation and show her how caring he was—and besides, it was technically his job. He hopped over a rarely-used counter and sprinted the ten yards to the ball machine in just over two seconds. He was out of shape, he thought to himself, shaking his head.

Veronica had been reaching for her ball, but suddenly it wasn't there anymore. Instead, there was Griffin, smiling down at her as he rubbed the ball until it shined. "Oh, no, you don't have to do that," she said, a phrase she had perfected while turning down expensive dollhouses, sports cars and private islands from foreign dictators who had arrived at the White House solely to bestow upon her these 'gifts' and ask one teeny weeny favor of the President regarding the nuclear weapons ban...

"Yeah I do," said Griffin, and before he knew it he was babbling, the words flying out of his mouth like audiences out of a Lindsay Lohan movie, "I gotta make it look all nice and pretty like you." His eyes widened. Had he just said that? He had. His cover was blown. She knew now—he was in love with her. Damn!

Veronica was taken aback, but not much. Many people—including the foreign dictators who tried to give her Ferraris and whatnot—had told her that she was beautiful. But Griffin seemed so reserved, and his openness meant something to her. It was also a refreshing change to be described as "pretty" by someone her age—not hot, not sexy, but pretty. She decided then and there that Griffin was one of the sweetest, most genuine guys she'd ever known, although, living in Washington, she had not encountered many sweet and genuine guys in her lifetime. "Thank you, Griffin," she swooned, wrapping him in a quick hug. "That's so sweet." She broke off the embrace and headed back to her table.

Griffin, in a trance, wandered off aimlessly with no sense of direction whatsoever, tripping on a gutter rail.

Helen and Elly looked at Veronica strangely as she returned to their table. It was Elly's turn to bowl, but she decided that getting the 411 on this new potential BF of Veronica's was more important. "Who's *that*?" she asked, trying to sound disapproving—but she had to admit that he was kind of hot.

"He's a new butler. Friend of Layland's. He's really sweet. I like him," Veronica said.

The bombshell had been dropped. Helen and Elly's eyes opened wide. "You mean...you like him LIKE THAT?" asked Helen. "Like, IN THAT WAY?" No one was quite sure exactly what LIKE THAT and IN THAT WAY meant. They knew it had to do with going out, but there was still uncertainty on whether or not it extended to actually DOING IT or not. And frankly, they weren't quite sure how DOING IT was exactly defined either, and what IT extended to. So Veronica was forced to give an ambiguous answer to an ambiguous question.

"I dunno," she said, shrugging. "This is only his second day her, but he's been really nice to me...I'm not sure." She had seriously started to mull over the possibility of liking Griffin IN THAT WAY, whatever that meant. "I'm just not sure," she repeated, reaching a hand into the fries.

Unsatisfied, Elly huffily got to her feet and promptly bowled a gutter ball.

Meanwhile, Layland intercepted Griffin right outside the bowling alley. "How'd it go?" he badgered Griffin like a real prick of a prosecuting attorney.

"She hugged me," Griffin said dreamily, as though he were floating on a cloud, or possibly a snowbank—either way, he didn't get the feeling his feet were on solid ground.

Layland shook his head. *Ah, to be young and in love.* "Man, a hug? That's no big deal. She's hugged me plenty of times before, and I know she doesn't..." but after sneaking a glance at Griffin's crestfallen face, he backtracked like a presidential candidate in the wake of a gaffe-fest. "But, y'know, a hug's good. A hug's a step. Like opening the box? That's the first step to assembling a TV. And a hug? That's the first step to getting her...you know...in bed." He had no idea why or how he had just compared assembling a TV to sex, but he was proud of himself for doing it.

Griffin knew of sex. He perceived it as something humans obligatorily did to procreate, but he knew none of the other terms for it, such as 'getting her in bed'. As far as he was concerned, the only reason to have intercourse (for that was the only name he knew it by) was to populate the earth. Of course, this went against many of his career goals as someone whose job was to rid the earth of certain, which is why he had no plans to procreate. "Why would I want her to get in bed?" he asked. "Wouldn't she just go to sleep? I would want her to stay up so she can talk to me!"

Layland decided that his naïve friend would learn in due time what exactly Layland was talking about. Layland knew for sure that Veronica would never think of doing anything like that—for him, it was only a term to kick around with Griffin so as to assert his masculinity. “So what did her friends think of you?” he asked.

Griffin was trained to read people’s facial expressions and could provide a detailed analysis of their feelings, danger level, and dinner plans in mere milliseconds. Of course, these skills had waned, but the one Veronica called Elly did not seem to like him very much. “That Elly girl? She...”

“Oh,” Layland laughed. “Yeah. Her. She just does that because she’s insecure, and she doesn’t want Veronica to have a boyfriend before her, and, uh...mostly just the last one.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry about her. It’s not as if she’s gonna—”

James materialized out of nowhere like a coworjer that happens to walk along just as you’re making fun of them. James, as usual, was angry at Layland. What was the idiot doing milling around? If it were James, he would be ACTIVELY SEEKING something to do. There were plenty of things that needed fixing in the White House, although, James sighed, they were not always problems a teenage butler could solve. James had thought that, when Griffin arrived, he would be a positive influence on Layland, who would start working harder and more often. But apparently Layland had sucked Griffin into his damnable cycle of lollygagging and dillydallying and dawdling and using current slang terms.

“You two!” James barked. “What are you doing?”

Layland tried to think up an excuse, like an Iranian dictator who has been caught with a nuclear missile. *Uh...I just...borrowed it for the weekend!* But he had used all his excuses on James long ago. Griffin had learned, under Sir, to talk himself out of an espionage situation, but Griffin didn’t think that *I have an urgent message for the commander* would be fitting in this context.

James lost his head for the fourteenth time that day. “Nothing! That’s what! Nothing! So I want you two to do something—now! And clean the bathrooms! Hop to it! Chop-chop!”

Layland swore under his breath. James didn't care—he heard those words enough from people coming out of the Oval Office. He was going to put these brats to work in the bathrooms until they would be begging to trim President Carr's toenails and rub on his back ointment.

Griffin shrugged. He'd been having fun, but after all, it was his job. And, after a period of thought, he decided he liked it much better than the old one. Cleaning toilets with the possibility of seeing Veronica afterward now seemed a lot better than getting shot at.

Layland didn't share Griffin's passion for work. He was putting much more energy into moaning about the energy it took to scrub the floor than he was into actually scrubbing the floor itself. Griffin, after a while, began to sympathize. He had never questioned a job before, but now, he decided that this was getting rather tedious, and he would much rather—

The door swung open and Veronica strode in. She hadn't expected to see them in here, but she was used to heading into a room in which servants were cleaning—after all, President Carr had left more Snickers wrappers lying around the White House than he'd left legacies. "Hi, you guys!" she said, cheerily. "Oh, man. Did James make you clean the bathroom again?"

"Yeah," sighed Layland melodramatically, following it up with a string of obscenities.

She sighed sympathetically, the high-pitched noise descending like an immaculate drop of rain from a wispy cloud—at least that's what it sounded like to Griffin, who had become so disillusioned that to him, if she spontaneously combusted, he would think of a cutesy metaphor to describe it. "That sucks," she said, grimacing. "I'd help you guys, but Daddy has a TV interview he wants me to be at. He's promoting family values."

President Carr was divorced, was the top contributor to many Washington escort services, and had a cousin who had killed his family in a fit of rage and depression that People magazine insinuated was caused by an "alien abduction".

In any event, a Washington Post columnist had mused, he was not the type to be giving a speech on family values. But, a New York Times correspondent had noted, having his daughter there might help. She seemed like an awfully well-raised and

wholesome girl (nothing at all like the Bush Twins), so although President Carr had failed as a husband, a cousin, and generally as a President, maybe he wasn't so bad as a father. This caused the Washington Post columnist to call the New York Times correspondent a raging nincompoop in a fight so publicized that it was made into seven different video games.

Veronica proceeded to go into the stall, and the rest was left up to Griffin's imagination. He tried to convince himself that the right thing to do was to focus on polishing the floor. Layland, of course, had none of Griffin's impressive willpower and began doing a pitiful version of the army crawl (which Griffin had mastered at age three and a half) towards Veronica's stall. Two stalls away, as he dreamily dragged himself across the tile, Veronica's voice came echoing out of the stall.

"Don't even think about it, Layland."

"Man, how does she do that?" Layland said to no one in particular, then headed over to the closet and pretended to search for towels. Of course, he was actually looking for a periscope that the Roosevelt kids had hidden there. He pulled it off the top shelf and had just begun to advance towards the stall when Veronica pushed open the door and walk out, shrieking madly as she saw Layland with the periscope.

Griffin had not been paying much attention to Layland and the periscope, but when he heard Veronica's startled screams, he was ready to run over and bust some Tae Kwan Do moves on Layland's head.

Veronica got to Layland first, slapping Layland about the face until it became clear to her that the necessary damage had been inflicted.

Griffin had not idea what had happened, but he knew that it had made Veronica scream, which, in itself, was enough to make Griffin want to punch Layland in the testicles. Then again, he'd be interfering with Veronica's beating, and he certainly didn't want to do that.

"Don't do that to me again!" Veronica admonished Layland sternly. "I really mean it."

Layland looked down at the ground like a child with ADHD who had spotted something interesting on the fl—hey, look, a butterfly!

"Jerk," she added, a bit more lightly. Then she turned to Griffin. "Thanks for being so nice and *respecting my privacy*," she said sweetly, her last three words directed at Layland, who rolled his eyes.

She gave Layland the finger strode out, the door banging shut behind her. Layland looked sheepishly at Griffin. "Man," he chuckled. "You got it in the bag now."

There were a lot of things Griffin would rather do than hand weights to a sweating vice-president. Vice President Phillips' new exercise regimen involved Griffin effortlessly handing him large hunks of metal and VP Phillips holding them just above his face—not lifting them anywhere but making sure they didn't fall and disfigure his very vice-presidential nose.

Vice President Phillips wrestled with the thirty-pound weight for a while, until he was satisfied that his ability to lift thirty-pounders had taken that large first step from nonexistent to minimal. He was ready for the next step.

"All right, boy," he grunted. "Hand me my fifty-pounder."

Griffin swung the fifty-pound weight off the rack effortlessly, and prepared to hand it to Vice President Phillips when, out of the corner of his eye, something very captivating approached.

Griffin had not yet been in the White House for long enough to know that the pool was right next to the gym. Veronica, on the other hand, had lived there a couple years and knew exactly where the pool was. She also knew that she wanted to swim in it. So there she was, walking down to the pool, with Elly and Helen.

They were wearing bikinis.

Griffin had no idea what a bikini was. He assumed all women wore dresses, skirts, and blouses, or, in the case of that Hillary Clinton woman who was in all the newspapers Sir had given him to read, pantsuits.

Although Griffin didn't know what a bikini was, it didn't take him long to figure it out—not long at all, especially since Veronica's bikini was not particularly large and fit snugly around her breasts, which made what happened next completely understandable.

Griffin went slack-jawed, and slack-handed as well, letting the fifty-pound weight tumble from his hand. At that time, unfortunately his hand and the weight were positioned exactly three feet above Vice President Phillips' gonads.

Vice-President Phillips let out a scream and proceeded to topple off his bench and roll around on the floor, clutching his balls.

Helen, Elly, and Veronica heard the screams loud and clear. Wondering if Rihanna and Chris Brown were staying in the White House, they swiveled their heads

towards the weight room and saw Griffin smiling sheepishly at them as Vice-President Phillips rolled around in agony in the background.

Miraculously, James didn't fire Griffin. Griffin had been fired approximately twenty times by Vice President Phillips, but James, who was substantially more impressed by Griffin's work than Layland's, decided that Griffin could be pardoned.

Griffin soon became a cult hero in the White House, and Layland was thrilled to be part of his posse. "Dude," he would say several times daily, "Everyone's going crazy 'cause you busted the vice-president's balls. We gotta have Veronica walk around in a bikini all the time."

Veronica had been laying low for a while, knowing that she had inadvertently caused the accident in the weight room, and did not want to impair Vice President Phillips' ability to someday sire children, although based on how heavy that weight had looked, she knew that it may already have been too late.

Griffin was in agony during those few days that Veronica avoided them in hopes of keeping Vice President Phillips fertile. He enjoyed nothing more sightings of Veronica. He inhaled her voice like cigarette smoke, and he concluded that he was now dangerously addicted. He dreamt about her more and more often, without Jay Leno in the picture.

One morning, Veronica decided that had been enough of that. Griffin was cool, and who cared if Vice President Phillips never had kids? Besides, her father had just bought her a new copy of Homicidal Slayer Slaughter Massacre Kill Death III (with some of Nebraska's highway budget, unbeknownst to Veronica), and she needed someone to play it with her—her father was already busy playing his own version in the Middle East. So, at five in the morning, after waking early and not being able to go back to sleep, she dialed Griffin's room.

Griffin was trained to be alert and ready to kill at the slightest noise. He woke up as soon as the phone rang and immediately snatched it off its stand.

"Who is it?" he grumbled. He had been dreaming about Veronica. Again. There had been dragons that turned into Mitsubishis and an evil talking slinky that had taken Helen and Elly captive. And, of course, Veronica herself, in a bikini, running alongside Griffin as he defeated the evil talking slinky with ease. Who did the person on the other

end of the line think they were, interrupting his wonderful Veronica-in-a-bikini dream with their stupid phone call?

"It's me!" came the bubbly voice from the other end of the phone. Trained in voice recognition (there were very few things he wasn't trained in), Griffin knew the voice the moment he heard it: It was Veronica, his savior, his Wonder Woman. At least that was what Layland had begun to call her whenever he wanted to tease Griffin: "You seen your Wonder Woman today, man?" he would ask.

Love is generally more effective than coffee, and at the sound of Veronica's voice Griffin was instantly wide awake. "H-hey Veronica," he stammered helplessly. "What's—what is it?"

"I need you and Layland down in the game room," she commanded. "Now." And then as an afterthought, "Please."

Between Veronica's utterances of the words 'I' and 'Please', Griffin had dressed, brushed his teeth, and thrown a shoe at Layland, who was rolling over and mumbling obscenities.

"What for?" he asked.

"Well, Daddy got me the new copy of Homicidal Slayer Slaughter Massacre Kill Death III, and I need *someone* to play it with me, as in you and Layland. Besides, this can probably get you off cleaning bathrooms."

Griffin desperately wanted to see Veronica again, and to someone who had spent his entire life learning to kill, maim, and withstand torture, playing Homicidal Slayer Slaughter Massacre Kill Death III sounded like a great way to spend an early morning. Nothing like a little pre-sunrise violence.

"Sure!" Griffin said excitedly. "We love you." He blinked, realized his faux pas, and hastily corrected himself. "I mean, we'd love to." Looking over at the bed, he noticed that Layland had nodded off again. Griffin threw his other shoe at him.

From the other end of the line, Veronica heard a thud, a shout, and a string of curses. "Are you OK?" she asked, concerned. "What happened?"

It occurred to Griffin that telling your potential girlfriend that you had just thrown a shoe at your roommate was not a good way to keep a potential girlfriend. He had learned many excuses and ways to lie in his training, but talking to Veronica had made him forget them all. Thus, he fabricated a statement word by word: "I...dropped

the...bed...on my...foot." Definitely not a classic improv performance, Griffin thought, and hung up before Veronica could see through his nonsense. "Layland?" he asked.

"What?" Layland grumbled as he tried to pull himself into his pants.

"What's Homicidal Slayer Slaughter Massacre Kill Death III?"

"It's—" he suddenly snapped to attention. "Holy crap, who has that? Are we gonna play it?"

"Veronica has it. She wants us to go play it with her."

"Dude, that is the greatest video game in the *universe!*"

"What exactly is a video game?"

Layland was starting to think that Griffin lived under a rock. The guy was oblivious to the simple concept of video games. He didn't know who Hannah Montana was. He was totally imbecilic when it came to the concepts of IMing, Facebook, email, and talking to girls.

"Well, you know, a video game is where you have the thing, the controller, and it's got these knobs and buttons, and you push the knobs and buttons to make your character move around and do stuff—"

"Like a remote?"

"Kinda. Then you just run around shooting people."

Layland continued to give Griffin a crash course in video games as they headed to the White House Game Room, which, unbeknownst to Veronica, was built with money that would otherwise have gone to preserve a national park in Utah. President Carr had decided that his daughter deserved a game room more than those Mormons deserved a couple trees and fish. They already had fourteen wives, no point in letting them get greedy.

Griffin was repeating 'X-button Y-button A-button B-button Left button Right button Left thumbstick Right thumbstick' over and over again, the formula he had used to memorize codes and combinations in the past. Of course, all his careful memorization went straight to hell as soon as he saw Veronica. She triumphantly held up the copy of the game, the cover of which depicted a soldier carrying a machine gun with blood splattered all over it. After giving the guys a few seconds to gush over its nauseatingly gory cover art, she slipped it into the disk drive.

"Thanks for coming, guys," she beamed. "I got you guys cokes and doughnuts. Don't spill on the couch." It was the nicest couch money that would have helped Hurricane Katrina victims could buy. Of course, the president would never have let Veronica know that people had been stranded on rooftops just so that she could have zebra-print upholstery on her favorite couch.

"So...how do you play?" asked Griffin, trying to sound extremely interested in the game (which wasn't all that hard) and trying not to sound stupid (which was quite hard indeed).

"Shoot anything," Veronica said, shrugging.

"I don't believe you," smirked Layland. "Your bedroom is decorated with friggin' peace signs. 'Give Peace A Chance' is on your iPod. C'mon!"

"It's a video game, Layland," she said, rolling her eyes. "No one feels pain. No one dies. No one is orphaned. No pop singers come out and make me feel guilty about it."

"You're gonna feel guilty that you even thought you were on my level after I blast you to pieces," taunted Layland. "You will be feeling *pain*, Miss Veronicaaah!"

Griffin had Layland by his pressure points on the neck, squeezing relentlessly. If anyone attempted to be superior to his Wonder Woman, they had to be ready to feel the Griffin burn.

"Griffin!" shouted Veronica, shocked. "What the hell are you doing?"

Griffin regained control of his body and withdrew his hands from Layland's neck, trying to make up an excuse. "That's...that's how it goes in America, right? Like a high-five? I was trying to congratulate him on...on his witty comment."

"Well," whined Layland, "Your *congratulation* has made my neck dead. Congratulations. No, dude, it's all good. But I thought I had you Americanized by now."

Griffin shook his head.

"Oh, that's right," nodded Layland wryly. "I haven't taken you to see a Judd Apatow movie yet."

Veronica tossed them both controllers. Griffin held his backwards.

"Griffin, you sure you'll be able to play?" Veronica asked

Griffin would rather take a shower with Michael Jackson than not play with Veronica. Desperately, even more desperately than Angelina Jolie filling out

adoption papers, he looked her in the eyes pleadingly. "I can play," he said earnestly. "I can do this. Really, I can."

"OK," she said, nodding. Griffin tossed his controller in the air triumphantly like a sailor's cap, except sailors' caps do not generally make dents in the ceiling. Griffin cowered like a cheating CEO in the midst of an FBI investigation, but Layland and Veronica burst into spontaneous laughter. Griffin thought that maybe they wanted an encore—*GOD, her laugh was heavenly*—but she was sitting down to get ready and he thought he should follow suit.

Layland hummed as the game, which was as fast as a US postal worker who was also a turtle, loaded. He hummed softly at first, like a bird, then louder, more relentlessly, and more annoying, like a Zamboni, until Veronica smacked him with her controller.

They were all facing a barren landscape, holding AK-47s with grenades strapped on their backs. Griffin would have preferred RPGs, but he was playing with Veronica, and when he was playing with Veronica, he would play with a bowie knife if he had to.

Suddenly aliens materialized out of the landscape, because the video game writers were two stoned college students who didn't want to think of a way to work the aliens in other than magical teleportation. Layland, who was not a good player, disintegrated on the spot. "I DIDN'T EVEN TOUCH ANYTHING!" he yelled forcefully at the screen. Veronica, meanwhile, who was more experienced with such games, cut down the first wave of dastardly alies with grenades, then turned and ran when she saw she was outnumbered. Griffin, who knew a thing or two about hand-to-hand combat, ran straight at the dastardly aliens and began swinging his gun around, screaming like someone who finds a human nose in their milk.

Layland and Veronica stared at him. There was no human nose in Griffin's coke, so why was he screaming? Heck, those sounded like...war cries. "Griffin?" asked Veronica gently. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to scare them."

"Dude," said Layland, rolling his eyes. "This is a *game*. It's not, like, real. You can't psych the aliens out."

“Oh.” Griffin stared at the screen sheepishly. “OK.” Of course it wasn’t real. He had just gotten too caught up in—oh God, they were killing his avatar. Griffin swung his gun in the air like a baseball bat, hoping to splatter some alien brains.

Griffin found the game to be quite entertaining. He was being asked to kill things—but he wasn’t being *told* to kill things. It was refreshing. He had to admit that his button-pushing skills were a bit erratic—he would blow up entire warehouses with no idea how he did it—but Griffin was great at the strategy aspect of the game—sneak up behind someone and kill. Griffin was cutting down a swath of enemies, but out of the corner of one of his eyes he was watching Veronica biting her lip as she frantically pressed buttons to stay alive. Soon out of the corner of his eye became one whole eye, and then both eyes, and then watching turned to staring, and then Veronica started to turn her head his way and he jerked his head back, in embarrassment. It hurt. He decided that if he were a soul-sucking attorney, he would sue love for whiplash.

From then on, Griffin started straying from the game whenever he could to look at Veronica. His play suffered, but it was worth it. He actually almost died once but kept going, methodically cutting a path through the aliens like a scientist on an exploration who had abandoned his machete and determined through experimentation that shooting the vines away with an AK-47 produced more positive results.

Suddenly, there was a satisfying explosion—that is, satisfying if you were Griffin, who had just caused it. Everyone around him crumpled like Frito bags, disintegrating into computer generated ash. Including Veronica.

Griffin didn’t notice that he had killed Veronica until her screen started flashing red and beeping, and then Griffin saw himself standing over her body. He started upon seeing these images. BAD BAD BAD BAD BAD, screamed his brain, which was currently going into red alert. At the same time, Griffin’s mouth went into hyperdrive.

“Oh my God Veronica are you OK I’m so sorry what have I done are you all right please don’t be mad at me I didn’t mean to oh I’m so stupid I can’t believe I did this I--”

“Oh my God, Griffin,” chuckled Veronica. “Stop being such a *spaz!* I’m fine, don’t worry. It’s just a game, OK? You can kill me all you want.”

At this point, Griffin was attempting to distinguish between reality and fantasy, which is not hard for normal people, but normal people do not spend their childhoods locked up in solitary confinement, learning how to kill people.

Veronica's avatar stood up, brushed itself off, and looked ready to do battle again. "See?" she said, as if she were taping up a three-year-old's boo-boo. "All better."

"I'm really sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Griffin, I swear to God, you're so cute when you worry. I'm fine, really."

Griffin had to repress the urge to bound around the room like Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and gleefully bellow "I'm cute! She thinks I'm cute!". This cemented it. This sealed the deal. She said he was cute. They would get married and have kids and live to be eighty and sit on the porch knitting and reading the Wall Street Journal. And they would call each other cute until one of them got severe Alzheimer's and thought that cute meant something else entirely, like pancakes. He turned and smiled at her, stretching his mouth as far as it would go like a college student trying to stretch a simple concept into fifteen pages. She smiled back.

Their moment of fleeting romanticism was cut abruptly short by a resounding explosion rippling through the room. Both their screens lit up bright red and their avatars were blasted into the air, flailing their arms, only to be deposited once more in the dust, dead for fifteen seconds.

Layland grinned manically from where he was. "Suckers," he sneered, and then, "Oh, crap," as his body was impaled by falling spaceship debris.

"This means war," teased Veronica, as her robot picked itself up and dusted itself off, pillar of resilience that it was, and drew its pink machine gun, looking slightly more menacing than a Chihuahua. "You're first," she said, trying to make her voice similar to what she thought a war general was supposed to sound like. Deep and commanding, she decided.

Griffin's fingers tensed on the controller, but reconsidered. He let his fingers loose from where they hugged the buttons, and let Veronica pump him full of lead. He could have dismantled her, of course. But he didn't want to.

Meanwhile, President Carr was establishing his love for his blackberry. Well, not the email part. All these angry people were asking him questions about things he had no idea that he did or places he had no idea existed. Wasn't Azerbaijan some sort of Sea World ride? But he had Family Feud on it. He liked that a lot.

Anne did not love President Carr's Blackberry. From the day Carr had played Family Feud through a joint chiefs meeting discussing increasing food stamps, she had

hated the Blackberry. She tried to utilize it to her benefit by sending him emails on it, but they were ignored. He even *deleted* them *in front of her*—the nerve! But she had found a way to hack into the Blackberry, crash Family Feud, and control it so that noisy, blinking reminders about things he had to go to flashed every two minutes.

“Sir,” she said irritably, “Did you get the note I sent you on your Blackberry about tonight?”

“What the hell is tonight? Another state dinner? Send Phillips. I got a date.”

Another thing Anne had done after hacking the Blackberry was delete the phone numbers of all the hookers. Of course, they kept getting called up. President Carr couldn’t keep the country’s finances secure, but he always had a tight hold on the numbers of his favorite prostitutes. “No, sir. The State of the Union address.”

“Oh, that crap.”

“No, not *that* crap. This is probably the single most important speech of your presidency.”

President Carr rolled his eyes like a teenager being told by his parents that \_\_\_\_\_ was the most important \_\_\_\_\_ of his life, and he needed to give up his life for it, even though a new thing came up roughly every fortnight. “What am I gonna talk about?” he whined.

“How the country is doing.”

President Carr wasn’t sure how the country was doing, but there seemed to be a lot of angry people yelling at him lately, so he thought he could take a stab at it. “Not well.”

“Correct.”

“And you want me to go say that to Congress? They’ll eat me alive!”

Anne rolled her eyes, like a parent telling her teenager, *I don’t care if all the girls at school have it, you’re returning that \$7,000 ruby*. “Sir, your duty is to tell them exactly what’s going on in our country. No sugarcoating.”

“How come they need to know?” he whined.

Anne sighed. Every day, it was how come. How come he couldn’t sit in the Oval Office in his underpants? How come he had to use a fork at state dinners? “Because if they don’t know what’s going on, how will they make decisions to—” she wanted to say ‘undo what you’ve done’, but she thought better of it— “Make things better for people.”

Ever since President Carr found out that he, in fact, could not write laws, only congress could—goodbye, Midget Enslavement Act—he had hated them. With a passion. The fact that they tried to impeach him a good 237 times did not help matters. He did, however, have a mole in congress—Rep. Seth Gorstein, R-NC, being paid \$3,000,000 yearly for his services, who had found some way to fix a ban on abortion to every impeachment bill that came along, thus killing it. Carr did, however, tolerate the Supreme Court, provided they ruled that enough Congressional laws were unconstitutional on a regular basis. “Why do I have to talk to them?” he pouted. “I don’t want to give a speech to them. You do it.”

“You’re the president.”

“So?”

“The President always gives the State of the Union speech.”

“Geez, Anne, you’re the one who always says we need change!”

*Yes, thought Anne, change regarding the occupants of the Lincoln Bedroom. A few less women under thirty might be nice.* “Sir,” she said, laying down the law to the man who approved all the laws, “You have to tell them how the country is doing.”

“But they’ll kill me!”

He was probably right. So many people with guns had lined up outside the Capitol that Demps, the head of the secret service, had decided it was not possible to arrest them all and would permit them to stand there as long as they didn’t shoot Carr, who would be surrounded by a ring of Secret Service agents, all of whom were coincidentally demanding pay raises.

As he walked towards breakfast—Mmm, donuts—Anne trotted next to him, trying to convince him to make the speech. They walked past the game room, where Carr saw Veronica with her butler friends, who he had dubbed Those Two Other Kids since the day he’d realized that there was no way in hell he was going to remember their names. “Hey, Anne,” he said. “Why don’t we take Veronica and Those Two Other Kids to the State of the Union with us? Then I won’t be afraid.”

Anne shrugged. She was just happy President Carr hadn’t asked to bring his security blanket. But she wasn’t going to give in easily for fear of looking soft. “I don’t know...” she hesitated.

"Anne, please?" whined President Carr. "Veronica's cute, they'll love her. And Those Two Other Kids, well, they'll make pretty darn good human shields."

## 12

The Secret Servicemen would not have minded if Carr was killed by one of those wackos at the Capitol with a sniper rifle, but they also did not mind a big fat paycheck in their pockets, so they grudgingly opened the limousine door, forming a ring around Carr and the three kids.

President Carr waved his arms about enthusiastically and grinned effusively, unaware that the crowd was growing more rowdy than a five-year-old being read Shakespeare. Eventually he realized that his enthusiasm and good will did not spread like a virus. He wished he had a happy virus. But then people would say he was causing disease as well as a recession. Every time he turned around it was something else. "Mr. President," called Kritz, his press secretary, stepping from his SUV (he had stopped riding in the presidential limo after Carr had stuffed iPod plugs in his ears and yelled "I'M NOT LISTENING" while Kritz was trying to ask him about a very important issue), "CBS wants you to do an interview at their studio for—"

"We'd have to close down the roads there," stated Simmons, a grizzled Secret Service agent. "We'd have to get a bomb squad over there, do a background check of all the employees, examine the camera apparatus..."

"How long would that take?" asked Kritz, fumbling with his phone.

"Maybe a week."

Two hundred dollars' worth of cell phone was dropped from limp hands onto the ground, where it lay there, cracked as the simulated skin of an old commercial actress before her skin magically becomes wrinkleless. President Carr made a note to himself: Call on Congress to invent phone Botox.

"You see," continued a very flustered Kritz, "They wanted an interview right after the state of the union address to talk about his speech, so—"

"You'll have to bring them over here. We'll do a strip search, dismantle the camera—I'm sure they know how to put it back together, right?"

"Sir, I think that's unnecessary—"

Simmons was one foot two inches taller than Kritz, and 150 pounds larger. He glared down authoritatively at Kritz, poked a finger into the frightened man's chest, and said, "Look, you. The security level at this point for the president is BURGANDY. That's WORSE than red. We had to invent a freaking new color for this man, and this event.

After all this extra protection, we are not going to lose him to an Achmed McBangbang hiding a gun in his camera. And if we do, then you will almost certainly be tried as an accomplice.”

Kritz had long ago decided that dark magic was what kept the White House running. After all, what other logical explanation could there be for him asking the president to do a TV interview and subsequently being threatened to kill him?

“You don’t want to be responsible for the death of POTUS,” said Simmons, poking a large, meaty finger into Kritz’s chest. Kritz, overcome by the stressful experience of talking to this man combined with the sheer horror sustained from watching the angry people with photoshopped signs of Carr’s head on a platter, fainted dead away.

President Carr put his arm around Veronica and hissed to her and Those Two Other Kids: “Just smile, wave, and pay no attention to the angry people who want to kill you.” That strategy had served President Carr very well during his campaign—especially at the debates—and during his tenure as President. He swelled with pride as he realized he was actually passing something down to a future generation to prepare them for the world to come. How comforting to know that, as the president of the United States, he could actually give back to society as well as take away from it.

Griffin had never had real guns with real bullets pointed in him, but he had been training for this all his life, and felt pretty relaxed. *Hey*, he thought, *maybe one of these angry people could shoot the President for me! Then I wouldn’t have to do it and I could stay with Veronica*—but what was he thinking? It was his duty to his country to kill this man, and nothing must distract him from that, he reminded himself.

Veronica was used to this enough to know that with the secret service guards around her, she couldn’t be hurt, so she flashed her pearly whites and waved. Mild cheers erupted from the crowd, who, according to a recent Gallup poll, thought seventy-four to twenty-six percent that President Carr’s thirteen-year-old daughter would be more capable of running the country than the President himself. She certainly was precocious, whereas her father was not, everyone agreed. Several grassroots organizations had set up a trust fund so that when she turned thirty-five, she could pursue the Presidency and undo everything her father had done.

Layland, not accustomed to having people pointing guns at him, almost fainted, but after seeing a Secret Serviceman spit on the limp body of Kritz, he decided that it was in his best interests to stay conscious.

They ascended the stairs to the capitol in a ceremonial fashion in case there might actually be a camera in the sea of guns. Speaker of the House Jane Hartman, a small, hoarse old woman with short gray hair and no less than seven moles on her face, was waiting at the top of the steps to greet them. President Carr tried to kiss her hand, but she swatted it away. She was not a big fan of President Carr, and had cosponsored every single congressional attempt to impeach him. Without a word, she turned and beckoned for them to follow her into the capitol.

They strode quickly through the halls of the capitol, like tourists who had reached the last leg of a boring museum tour and were quite anxious to leave so they could have an exotic hot dog. They made a beeline for the house floor, where two Secret Servicemen held open the doors for the president and his entourage.

The house floor was filled with congresspeople who wanted to—well, not kill Carr, that wouldn't be a politically sound move, but stick him in a cave somewhere very far away and elect Al Gore. They looked daggers at President Carr, who decided he needed to change his routine and went from smiling and waving to blowing kisses. The crowd grew even more hostile.

President Carr took the podium like a man on death row going to the electric chair or a hapless father being dragged along to a Miley Cyrus concert. He strategically positioned Griffin and Layland right in front of him, but Rep. Bud Jessper (D-OH) stood up from the front row, and, in a large, booming voice, while looking straight at the TV cameras, said "Mr. President, may I remind you that UN Security Council Resolution five-oh-eight-six-four-bee prohibits people from using children as human shields?"

"I knew that," huffed the President. "All right, guys, get outta here."

The three of them were ushered away from the podium, but not quickly enough to be shielded from the obscenities the lawmakers screamed when they thought they were out of earshot.

"This blows," muttered Layland. "What are we gonna do while he stands there and yaps?"

Veronica resented Layland's comments; she loved listening to her dad talk. She thought he had lots to say, he just wasn't sure how to say it. But for most people, President Carr's words were like little fishhooks that went into your brain and started to rip it apart. His skills as an orator were only better than his skills as a speechwriter—at an Israeli-Palestinian peace talk, he had managed to irk both parties at once—no small feat—when he read a speech he had written in which he chided them for killing each other, saying it was “Not good Christian values.” However, after a little bit of work from Anne, the issue had been resolved, the guns were put away, and one sheik had calmed himself enough to approach President Carr and extend him a very generous offer—twenty-six goats—for his daughter's hand in marriage.

“Fine,” Veronica consented. “Let's go to the cloakroom.”

Griffin, having intensively studied the capitol blueprints, knew where the cloakroom was. He knew where the janitor's closets were. When Layland asked what it was, he tried to hide the eye roll—after all, the only thing he was supposed to know were the insides of the white house bathrooms. Blowing his cover would not help him win Veronica over.

“It's where all the congresspeople go to hang out when a Republican is talking,” said Veronica. “They've got food and a bar and TV and stuff.”

Layland was mentally writing his request for a transfer to the cloakroom, where he could carry drinks and change the TV channels for the midget congresspeople and never have to see James again. “Sounds like heaven,” he said. “Let's go.”

The cloakroom was lavishly furnished, but did not meet Layland's standards, as there was an absence of air hockey, ping-pong, pool, or massage chairs. There was, however, a bar, but he doubted there was any alcohol behind it—for what would America do if their congresspeople got hammered before a big vote? America would likely have given seven billion dollars to Steven J. Mulhaney of Nirschutz, California, and would likely have invaded Britain, Kenya, Vietnam, and Iraq. He did, however, spy some root beer, which stopped him from proclaiming ‘this sucks’.

Griffin was on a mission. He didn't know how the hell he was supposed to carry his mission out while in the cloakroom, but he decided he had better do something—find some good hiding spots. *You have work to do*, he told himself, but he succumbed to temptation and sat down at the bar next to Layland

Veronica vaulted the bar flawlessly, as nimble as a slinky, and her legs, spread ten inches apart and clad in a tight denim skirt, turned towards Griffin for a fleeting second, quickly as a magic trick, or like a deer darting in and out between—

*You. Are. On. A. Mission.* Griffin told himself sternly but halfheartedly.

“So what’ll it be, boys?” Veronica smiled fake-coyly, snapping Griffin out of his killing-the-president/Veronica-on-a-bed-with-rose-petals reverie.

“I vill take a rhoot bearh,” said Layland, with an accent that was German, French, New York, and even a little bit Polynesian all in one, which all together gave the impression that he was not a resident of any of those places but in fact just an idiot. “Und ze gantulmen ohn mai rhite vill half ze zame ting az vell.”

Veronica made a show of popping the caps off the root beer bottles with an expertise usually reserved for people in beer commercials. She handed the boys the drinks. Layland raced to lick the bubbles off the sides as they spilled over, and Griffin, not wanting to be outdone, followed suit. Layland chugged his like it was an antidote to some sort of fatal poison, turning bug-eyed in his attempts to swallow a whole bottle of root beer in one gulp. Veronica seemed amused, so Griffin threw the root beer back and chugged like a college frat boy, sucking the sticky liquid in and forcing it down his—

“Whoa! Guys! Stop! Don’t kill yourselves!” said Veronica concernedly, on account of Layland having toppled over due to an off-balance center of gravity. Griffin, following orders, immediately pulled the root beer away from his mouth, spewing a stream of liquid onto the wall and the portrait of John Quincy Adams, ruining the priceless painting—but that was not important; the scary part was that it was only six inches from Veronica’s silky, layered hair.

“Griffin! What was that?” she reared away, taken aback by the sudden stream of root beer that could’ve come from a supersoaker. She hurried over with a washcloth to try and wipe off John Quincy Adams, who, according to the root beer stain covering his portrait, was the nation’s first black president.

Many things were flashing through Griffin’s mind: *disapproval she loves me not disappointed disgusted scared ignore dump leave stupid death death death.*

Then, more things fought through from the back of his brain like Spartan warriors: *Sir mission country kill president spy counting on you mission complete success training power slacker slacker slacker guilt guilt guilt.*

Another word tried to fight through from the back of his brain, like a French warrior who's not sure quite what to do: *pancakes*. It did not succeed, as is generally the case with French warriors.

Veronica eventually decided that John Quincy Adams was a lost cause and that maybe people would just mistake him for Robert Downey Jr. She turned and saw Griffin's stricken expression and instantly felt bad for him—he hadn't meant to deface a national treasure in his manly chugging competition, after all. "It's all right, Griffin," she soothed. "Don't worry. It's just some dead guy. You don't have to worry about it." This guy was some case, she decided. He freaked out at the slightest stuff, but he was really really cute—even though he kind of got a distant, angry look in his eyes when they were having fun, like he wanted to kill someone or watch a made-for-TV movie. She patted his arm quickly.

Two light taps—both were soothing, and when Griffin felt the soft caress of Veronica's skin on his, his mind electrified and he felt—he felt like more than he ever had. The memories from training with Sir seemed to wash away, and a new past sprang out from behind the White House and bounded straight for Griffin, emerging straight from Veronica's two taps. Griffin focused on Veronica, admiring her, and realizing he needed to say something. He pressured his vocal chords to squeeze out a quick: "Sorry".

Layland lay on the floor. His head hurt. Griffin was having some sort of weird fit about something or other. He always seemed to do that in front of Veronica. Layland would have to sit down and have a talk with him and talk about how important it is to act manly in front of girls, and how having weird fits is not at all acting manly. He was looking up at the barstool he used to be sitting on. To the left was a fridge. He wondered if there was anything good inside. He focused his eyes, and there was—

"Ice cream!" came the call from the floor as Griffin and Veronica whipped their heads around. Layland grasped the edge of the barstool, pulled himself up, and hobbled towards the fridge, a man with a possible concussion, but one on a mission. It was then when he noticed there was not only ice cream; there was fudge sauce and caramel sauce and whipped cream and strawberries. Although most teenage boys, when questioned, would assert that the Playboy Mansion was their idea of paradise, Layland

was ready to admit that these quarts of ice cream and fudge sauce came a close second. He wondered if he was hallucinating.

He was not. Veronica saw this too, and gave a scream, a little, delicate, delighted scream of rapture. The quick, piercing “EEEE!” made the blood rush to Griffin’s face; he could not help but flush and smile as his heart quickened like that of a man who realized he did not, in fact, know where he was going and that he would, in fact, have to take his wife’s advice and ask a gas station attendant how exactly to get to Olive Garden. Veronica hurried over to the ice cream case and gazed in awe at the treasure chest of sweetness that awaited her.

Griffin was not entirely sure what the hullabaloo was all about, but he followed them. He looked into the cooler, recognizing it as ice cream. He was not enthralled. Sir had never let him have ice cream, and Sir had always had good reasons for everything—then again, Sir had never let him do all the things he and Layland did that he loved, like playing sock hockey in the bowling alley, prank-calling the secretary of state and pretending to be the President of Mongolia, and listen to heavy metal. Still, Griffin was wary of the ice cream. Would it bite him? Layland and Veronica had reached into the fridge and were beginning to unload the ice cream. It did not bite them, so Griffin followed suit.

“Haagen-Dazs,” drawled Layland, which drew a giggle from Veronica. Griffin immediately resolved to stop trying to keep his American accent. Screw the mission. “Would you like me to get some bowls?” he asked, letting his guard down and using his real accent for the first time since he’d come to America.

“Wow, Griffin!” said Veronica, a look of awe in her eyes. “I never noticed your accent before.” Veronica had a thing for accents; she had written countless love letters to all the British princes. None of them had responded; everything that arrived in England from the White House was thrown into the incinerator.

Layland did not notice Griffin’s accent; he was fixated on the ice cream the way fangirls are fixated on the Jonas Brothers’ hair. “Yeah. Bowls. Get. You. Bowls. Ice Cream. Put in. Bowls. Yeah.” Layland began scooping things out of the fridge with gusto—sprinkles! Was this a dream? —so much gusto, in fact, that he managed to knock over a tub of hot fudge and a tub of caramel sauce, which tumbled to the ground with a large ‘splat’ sound, and began oozing around the floor, spreading like that a chain mail

about a girl named Sara who was murdered by her boyfriend and will sneak into your room at night and kill you if you don't send this message to ten more people.

"Oh, God, Layland!" sighed Veronica, rubbing her temples in exasperation. "Now we have to clean this all up."

"Then what would the janitor do?" Layland asked.

"Sit in the broom closet and do the crossword."

"Why don't I do that and let the janitor clean up the mess?"

Veronica lightly swatted him on the arm. Griffin, who needed to feel the high of more physical contact, realized getting swatted on the arm was not necessarily the form of physical contact he wanted, but he was willing to take whatever he could get. He was formulating something along the lines of Layland's statement, but the best he could come up with was "I like crossword puzzles."

There was no need to provoke Veronica anyway, because she, thoroughly disgusted with Layland, turned around, only to be met by a puddle of brown goop that looked like swamp mud. "Ewww!" She screamed, waving her arms and stumbling away from it, grabbing onto Griffin's shoulder for support.

Griffin felt the blood rush to his head, but knew he could not repeat the scene from the stables and summoned all of his willpower to keep from passing out in the fudge sauce. Veronica's hand gripped his shoulder tightly as she inspected the bottoms of her shoes. Once she was satisfied that no damage had been done, she released her grip—Griffin was not coherent enough to thank her—grabbed a bowl, and started carefully scooping ice cream and arranging her assorted toppings. Layland followed suit, and Griffin, eager to see what was so great about ice cream, got double portions of whatever Veronica was loading up.

He liked it. He really did. It tasted sweet, melting on his tongue, and the toppings mixed with it in his mouth, creating a very distinct and succulent flavor known only as "Awesome ice cream sundae". He did not care if this would increase his weight, hindering his agility and mobility. He had rigorously exercised to keep his BMI in Sir's target range, and he figured a bowl of ice cream wouldn't set everything off too much, even if it looked more like a life-size replica of the Leaning Tower of Pisa than a sundae.

Layland, who was easily bored, grabbed the TV remote with the hand that had the least hot fudge smeared all over it. The fudge still obscured several buttons,

including the mute button, which the congresspeople who frequented the cloakroom found quite handy, especially during debates. Layland pressed the power button with his fudge-soaked thumb, staining it a dark brown, and an image popped up on the screen of an over-makeuped woman who, judging by the size of her breast implants, was desperately trying to appeal to young men despite the fact that she was fifty-five and just getting over addictions to thirteen different substances. She was jabbering on about some congressman of other who had introduced House Resolution five million and twelve, which would provide health care to every single child in America, and what a big step this was for Washington, and slipping in a personal anecdote that nobody really cared about or listened too.

Layland was dissatisfied with the teleprompter-reading breast-implanted newslady, so he attempted to switch channels. However, the television had been set to Capitol Hill News and Capitol Hill News only (despite Dan Doshuvknee (R-MI)'s valiant attempt to switch it to FOX for good). Layland swore under his breath; he wanted something violent or naked or at least entertaining. He started counting the times the woman on screen stuttered through her teleprompter script, but got bored with this activity after precisely twenty-three seconds. He turned to Veronica. "You know what this room needs?" he lamented. "Some music."

"I brought my iPod," she said, holding up a pink device that had (unbeknownst to her) been purchased with money that was supposed to build a school in Alaska. "Maybe if I could plug it into a computer or something."

She headed over to the computer behind the bar that was used for tallying up purchases and playing online poker—the woman who worked there thought playing solitaire at work was much too cliché—and tried to find a cord into which she could plug her iPod. There was, however, no such cord. There were many complicated buttons, but Veronica, though no technology expert, was fairly sure she could not plug an iPod into a button. "Hey, can you guys help me with this?" she called.

Layland was fixated on his ice cream, and only caught the words 'guys help', neither of which involved ice cream. He ignored her and continued to eat.

Griffin was glad to rush to help. There was a damsel in distress, a damsel he particularly happened to have a crush on, who was distressed about a computer, an object that he happened to know a lot about, thanks to Sir. He tried to recall what he

had retained from Sir's School of Hard Knocks Technology Class as he jumped up from the table to help Veronica, upsetting his bowl of ice cream in the process. It fell to the ground with a noise that could only be described as 'splat'. Griffin vaulted the bar and bounded over to Veronica's side. "What do you need?"

"I wanna plug in my iPod," she said with intent frustration--why wouldn't it just do what she *asked* it to?--"But the stupid computer won't let me." Veronica was extremely tolerant of other people, but that tolerance did not expand to technology, with its smarmy error messages. If the people who made these things were gonna become billionaires, then their products had better freaking work—at least, that was her philosophy.

Griffin nodded sympathetically—he had always had problems with technology, as he'd always had with anything he could not defeat in hand-to-hand combat. But he knew enough to be able to successfully hack a computer, so he turned the it on and logged in within sixteen seconds.

"Wow," marveled Veronica. "How'd you get the password that fast?"

When Griffin saw Veronica so full of pride, he decided not to mention that the password was written on a sticky note on the counter. He just tapped his head knowingly, implying that he had an infinite bank of passwords stashed inside his brain.

Veronica stood there, still trying to understand what she had just witnessed. "Wait!" she exclaimed, after she had fully processed the events of the previous sixteen seconds. "Did you just, like, hack in?"

Griffin, if he had enough time, would have been able to distinguish her tone as either impressed or scornful, but since he had nowhere near enough time, he decided that the best thing was to just say the truth: "Yes."

"Wow," she sighed. So she *was* impressed after all. "Just don't do anything illegal, OK?"

Griffin decided not to tell her that what he had done was already illegal, so he just continued with his work.

He was finished in three minutes. "Can I see that?" he asked Veronica, referencing the hot pink iPod. She handed it to him, and he tinkered with some wires and the device until an iTunes window popped up on the screen. Veronica, amazed, clicked 'play', and a pop singer's sultry voice filled the room.

"Ohmigod," she swooned. "Griffin, that's awesome! How'd you do that?"

From the other side of the room, Layland heard something along the lines of "blah blah blah USB adapter mumbo jumbo system preferences power cord bibbidi bobbidi boo port compatible blah blah blah et cetera." He realized that he was likely missing something over there. He also realized that his ice cream was starting to melt. He dug the spoon back in and lifted a large scoop up, lethargically, towards his mouth. He reached his spoon down for another bite, and then realized he was scraping ceramic. He looked down at the bowl, realizing the ice cream was gone. This would not do. He trudged over to the cupboard, looking for other foodstuffs, and spied—what was this? Three spray cans of whipped cream that he had neglected to raid on his hunt for toppings. He grabbed them out greedily, and, holding one can over his face, pressed down on the button. Whipped cream shot into his eye. He started, dropping the can, but then a maniacal smile began to creep up the corners of his face, and his sugar-saturated brain began to form a plan.

Veronica was hopping around and waving her arms to the music. "Dance with me, Griffin!" she squealed.

Griffin desperately wanted to dance. He wanted to dance, in fact, more than anything, because he was under the impression that dancing might involve some sort of physical contact. The problem was that he had no idea how one would dance. "I...don't know how..." he stammered.

Veronica stared at Griffin. He didn't know how to DANCE? He was awkward, but in such a cute way. "Here," she said sweetly, "I'll show you how." She held out her hands, indicating for him to take them.

Griffin was processing this gesture. Did she mean for him to take her hands? He reached out tentatively, and then recoiled as a blast of whipped cream hit him in the face. He started employing his best defense tactics in the general direction of the whipped cream, but Layland was wise enough to jump out of the way, and Griffin ended up kicking the bar--hard.

"Layland!" Veronica shouted, annoyed but amused as she, too, received a squirt of whipped cream in the face. He tossed her a bottle of whipped cream, and one to Griffin too. Veronica laughed, tore off the cap, and started blasting Layland with whipped cream.

Griffin decided he was meant to follow suit, and began shooting spurts of whipped cream at both Layland and Veronica. He enjoyed it immensely.

Outside, things were a little less jolly. Rep. Chuck Alter (D-MN) was a freshman congressman and the official low man on the totem pole. He was known around congress for being notoriously grumpy, because he was always stuck in the back of the house floor during votes. This did not suit Chuck; he wanted to be near the action. When he first heard the pop song, he wondered if someone had forgotten to turn off their cell phone and had made one of those damnable songs their ringtone. After the noise persisted, Chuck, despite being a congressman, processed the information that was given to him and made a timely conclusion—the noise was not a cell phone ringtone, and someone was playing music during the President’s speech. He bristled. How inconsiderate! Then the screaming commenced, and though faint, it was quite annoying, like a chatty guy twelve rows behind you in the movie theatre. Other heads had begun to turn, and many of these heads’ faces made expressions that Chuck discerned as *what the hell is that noise* and *you, new guy, find out what that noise is*. As far as Chuck was concerned, this was his chance to be at the center of everything. He was on live TV, and he was going to save the President’s speech by stomping out disrespect. At this rate, he reasoned, he would be secretary of state in no time. Though he was a congressman, he had enough sense to wait for the cameras to follow him before he strode over to the doors, slowly and dramatically, like a model on the catwalk, but without the sultriness or tight pants, and threw them open.

## 13

President Carr's deer-in-the-headlights look was caught on TV more often than a screaming match between a married couple on a reality show. He used the look so much—after any faux pas or accidental missile launch—that many pundits had recommended that he patent it. When Rep. Chuck Alter threw open the doors, the President got that look again, but this time everyone was looking at something else: His daughter, spraying whipped cream on the two other kids, while spilled ice cream and fudge sauce covered the couches in the cloakroom and pop music blared from a computer. President Carr had been coached by Ann in deriving human feelings from facial expressions, and he guessed that, by the seething looks on the faces of the congresspeople, they were angry. And he knew, from experience, that they were going to take their anger out on his daughter—his sweet little angel who didn't do anything wrong. They could get new couches for the cloakroom—just take it out of Social Security. He would not let them tear her down. He almost stepped forward and said that he had trashed the entire room (and started the music) with telekinesis, but realized that, even for him, that sounded a little contrived.

Griffin was still trying to understand what was going on. Dancing around with Veronica, eating the sundaes, spraying the whipped cream, all of it gave him such exhilaration, an adrenaline rush that exceeded any rush he'd had during a training mission. He felt his mouth muscles relaxing, and for a second it hit him that he had been grinning before the beady-eyed man in the suit opened the door.

Anne considered taking a gun from one of the secret servicemen and killing herself. She knew that teenagers acted out sometimes—she, for instance, once stayed up until 9:30 and took a swig of forbidden Coca-Cola from the refrigerator—but did this one have to do it on national TV? And goddamnit, why couldn't the European kid look more remorseful? No telling how the news shows would spin that tomorrow: Putting the kid's grinning mug side-by-side with the trashed cloakroom.

Like father, like daughter, was the general gist of the murmurings going on between the congresspeople. Rep. Tony Shoulman (R-CO) remarked loudly that she must have been on drugs. Rep. Sharon Hausner (D-ME) commented at the top of her lungs that maybe if the girl had had better role models—but was interrupted by Sen. Thomas Kardiman (R-MT), who wanted to point out that Hausner had arrived hungover

to address a high school in Bangor, and had crashed into the school's 'Don't Drink And Drive' sign on her way out. Rep. Connie Watkins (D-NY) accused Senator Kardiman of being a sexist pig, and the fight was on. Mudslinging broke loose on the house floor, and the situation was, for the moment, forgotten.

Veronica saw her father staring at her from across the House Floor, his mouth agape, as if he was about to eat an imaginary éclair. Being a lot sharper than he was, she realized that as soon as the congresspeople stopped fighting, IF they ever stopped fighting, they'd look at this mess and they'd blame her, and then they'd blame her dad. They'd use this as another way to take him down, write bad articles about him, scream about him on TV, all for something he didn't even DO—and it was all her fault. The floral patterns on the walls blurred as her eyes welled up with tears, and she breathed deeply, punctuated by small moans, trying to suppress her pitiful sobs.

Griffin saw Veronica crying, and all the happiness instantly drained out of him. He wasn't quite sure why she was crying like this, but he desperately wanted—no, needed—to make her feel better. He had to make everything right.

"I did it!" he yelled to anyone who would listen. "I threw all the stuff all over the room! They were just sitting there, and at the end they got up and tried to stop me!" He realized that it sounded fake, but he kept going. "She had nothing to do with this!" he yelled, gesticulating wildly towards Veronica, "So don't get mad at her!"

Layland looked back and forth helplessly between Veronica and the pool of fudge sauce around his feet, trying to make an impossible choice. He hesitated, then, summoning all of his will, plunged his finger into the murky depths of the chocolate lake, brought it out, and licked it tenderly.

Ann had seen enough. President Carr was gaping like a fish, Veronica was a sobbing mess, one of the butlers was running around yelling crazy stuff at congressmen, and the other one was eating fudge sauce off the floor. All televised by major news networks and shown to the general American public. She turned to the Secret Service agent who she guessed was in charge, because he had the shiniest head and the most expensive sunglasses, and said "Get us the hell out of here."

Three secret service agents dashed across the house floor, scooped up three teenagers, and rushed back, leaving the capitol behind President Carr, who was not currently functioning and had secret servicemen moving his arms and legs for him.

On the way out, Anne savagely kicked one of the ugly yellow walls, leaving a black scuff mark.

Everyone was ushered into the motorcade by secret service agents who pretended to know what they were doing by yelling loudly in an intimidating manner while whispering to the agents who had gone in to see the speech: "Dude, what the hell went on in there?"

On the drive home, especially after receiving messages from five major news networks on her cell phone, Anne contemplated suicide.

## 14

Anne came into work the next day, alive and extremely cantankerous. It was only because of the DC gun control laws that she hadn't done away with herself the night before.

That day, an emergency meeting was held in the Oval Office with the President, the Vice President, Veronica, the two other kids, James, the head of Housekeeping, the president's chief of staff, the president's press secretary, and Demps, who seemed to serve no purpose there except to step on the back of Kritz's shoes, for he had heard of the run-in that Kritz had had with Simmons. It was chaotic—one of the butlers, the European one, kept insisting that he had trashed the room himself while the other two lay comatosely on the sofas because he had drugged their sodas. When they came to, he said, they had, in the interest of stopping the defacing of an important government room, attacked him with whipped cream cans.

The kid told a good story, but the only one who believed him was President Carr, who stubbornly refused to believe anything else and kept banging things on the desk, attempting to adjourn the meeting.

Kritz paced the room nervously, muttering 'we can fix this', without providing any ways to fix it whatsoever.

Vice President Phillips, upon seeing Griffin, made sure to position himself in front of a desk so as to shield his abdomen. He also said the Hail Mary whenever Griffin made a slight movement.

The chief of staff, after two minutes of observing and identifying the problem, asked for and was granted a two-week vacation in the Bahamas, where he would be uncontactable. He took off like an Olympic sprinter soon afterwards, jumping off into a limo and speeding away.

Demps, who got bored of stepping on the shoes of Kritz after a while, opened a can of Pringles and began to eat them noisily. This would blow over, he knew, as everything always did.

James was ready to use the waterboarding devices hidden in the basement to get the truth out of the kids, and keep using them even after the truth was revealed, just for revenge. He also wanted to fire both butlers and deport them to Siberia, but Veronica, through her tears, pleaded with him to let them stay. The cardinal rule of

Housekeeping in the White House was when the First Daughter asked you to do something, you did it, and if the first daughter was crying while she asked you to do it, well, that was a dealbreaker. Eventually, James grudgingly sentenced the boys to hard labor scrubbing bathrooms, to which they both resignedly agreed.

Griffin swept the sponge across the tile in nice straight lines, making it sparkle like a stripper's underwear. He grew restless as he worked, wishing there was a TV in the bathroom he could watch. He had been trained to handle tediousness with ultimate calm, but in the past few weeks he had been so corrupted by this culture of instant gratification that he felt the need to be constantly stimulated. He sighed, and plunged the sponge into the bucket of Clorox as if he was trying to drown the damned thing forever. He remembered Sir telling him how soldiers in captivity designed entire houses in their heads, brick by brick, to keep from going insane, so he decided to design a bathroom, starting with the automatic drying machine.

At least he didn't have it as bad as Layland. Layland had to clean the employees' bathroom, which was the ultimate horror, especially after President Carr, after being told he was too tough on immigration, brought in a bunch of immigrants to clean the White House. The immigrants ate nothing but bean burritos.

Griffin had finished mentally designing the paper towel dispenser and had started on the sink when Veronica ambled through the door, which swung lazily behind her, not wanting to be closed but not having the energy to keep itself open, like a pendulum that was slowly dying because a forgetful old clocksworth had read 'fix clock' on his to-do list as 'visit grandchildren and tell them pointless stories about wars that may not have even existed'.

Griffin looked up at her from where he was scrubbing. If Griffin was Layland, he would have noticed that she was wearing a very short skirt. But Griffin was Griffin, and he noticed that her face was red and tear-stained, which made his chest feel heavy and powerless again. Something surged through him, an image of Veronica beaming like she'd just seen a Jonas Brothers concert on a rainbow. He had to get that back. Desperately trying to lift her spirits, like a nervous psychiatrist dealing with a suicidal maniac, he gazed up at her concernedly. "Are you all right?" he brought himself to ask.

"I'm fine," she lied, sniffing a little. Eager to change the subject, she added brightly: "James has you cleaning the bathrooms, huh? Bet that sucks. You want me to help?"

"No," said Griffin firmly, shaking his head. "I wouldn't want you to have to do that. Besides, I wouldn't want you to get into—"

A frazzled intern barged into the bathroom. Upon seeing Veronica there, he thought he'd stumbled into the ladies' bathroom, until he checked the sign on the door and saw that it did, in fact, say 'men'. He looked back and forth from Veronica to the sign and got the hell out of there.

"—any more trouble than I already have," Griffin continued after the door closed and the intern hurried away like a nun who had seen a copy of Playgirl.

"Don't worry." Veronica shook her head. "I'm not in any trouble. Dad's kind of out of it right now, and he wouldn't be mad anyway. I'm just—I can't believe what I did. It was stupid, and—I mean, when I saw him gaping I knew I had screwed everything up."

Griffin was confused. He had just been learning about this concept of fun, something he had never had in his training and whatnot. He had been having the most fun of his life in the cloakroom, and now Veronica, who was the Bill Gates of fun, thought it was 'screwing up'? "But we were having fun..." he trailed off. It was more of a question than a statement, and more of a bodyless random thought than a question.

"Yeah, but...that...I mean, that wasn't good. You saw, everyone went nuts. You know, I'm the First Daughter and everything, I have to be like a lady and get things right so I don't screw things up for my dad. And I don't mind that. I should be able to do that, right? I mean, I guess it's the price I have to pay for..." she swept her hand at the marble floors, the sterling-silver faucet handles on the sinks, and the magical hand-dryer machine, "All of this..."

Griffin felt a burst of air rush out of him. This wasn't happening. She wasn't just...forgetting about fun. For the sake of what? Some stupid government duty? He'd learned the easy way that doing your government duty had fewer rewards than spraying whipped cream down Layland's shirt. He wished, somehow, that he could steal a lot of money from a safe in the white house and buy another huge house with marble floors and a bowling alley and a machine hand dryer and a million cans of whipped cream so

they could have fun whenever they wanted. They could live there together, and Layland could come too.

“Well, you know.” Veronica wrung her hands. “I just wanted to say thanks for taking the bullet for me back there. I mean, it was really sweet of you.” She knelt down and wrapped her arms around him, resting her cheek against his for a brief second. Then she stood up, smiled, and left.

In a daze, Griffin went back to polishing the floor, which already sparkled. When James came in and found Griffin polishing the electric hand dryer for the fifteenth time, even he was impressed—the place looked an animal that bled lemon pledge had been slaughtered in it. James wasn’t about to forgive Griffin, but anyone who could make a bathroom shine like that was worthy of not being treated like he was pond scum—in fact, in James’ mind, Griffin had been promoted to subway rodent.

In Griffin’s mind, all he could see was Veronica. Her touch lingered on his torso and his cheek, and he wasn’t quite sure what to do or think, so he just kept polishing the electric hand dryer.

*Damned fine for a teenager,* James thought as he exited the bathroom.

## 15

The hug from Veronica had made Griffin a little light-headed; something Layland had noticed when Griffin bumped into the lamp for the third time that night. "Are you OK?" Layland asked cautiously. He had read in *The National Inquirer* that accidentally running into objects was a sure sign of mental instability and sociopathic tendencies. The article claimed that Jeffrey Dahmer would spend hours in his room dissecting pigs and walking into bedposts.

"Fuh," grunted Griffin, almost inaudibly. While Layland sincerely hoped that Griffin meant to say 'fine,' from what he'd read in that *National Inquirer* article, it probably meant 'I would like to strangle you and eat your body parts'.

"Why you acting so weird, man?" Layland asked, edging closer to the window.

"Veronica..." It was almost a whisper. Layland knew that Griffin wasn't planning on killing anyone—he was simply too infatuated with Veronica to notice that there were lamps in his way. Besides, Griffin killing anyone? What a joke. Layland knew that Griffin would never kill anyone.

"Yeah?" Layland queried casually, flopping down on his bed. "What about her, bro?"

"I was cleaning the bathroom today," began Griffin animatedly, snapping out of his funk as he vividly recalled the scene, "And Veronica walked in"—Layland began to like where this was going—"And offered to help me clean up"—Layland became slightly less interested—"And she was thanking me for taking the blame for what happened in the cloakroom and at the end, she gave me a hug."

Layland was about to explain to Griffin that in the age of sexting and hooking up, a hug meant extremely little and in fact, anything short of baby-making followed by a heartfelt marriage proposal did not mean that anyone liked anyone, but he decided to hold off and let Griffin bask in the glory of his somewhat pitiful achievement.

"A hug, man? Nice job! That means you made it to..." Layland did some quick calculations—"0.327<sup>th</sup> base. Congratulations." Layland gloated internally, because he was still ahead of Griffin in that manly competition of sexual one-upsmanship—he had gotten to second base with the daughter of the strictly orthodox Shah Mustafa Ababa of Iran, who was so starved for male company that she quite literally pounced on Layland

and dragged him behind a large conference table as her father and his boss conferred in the Oval Office.

“Thanks,” Griffin mumbled, bumping into the nightstand.

Layland rolled his eyes. “Get some sleep, so you can impress Miss Veronica.”

Over the next couple days, Griffin hung around Veronica as much as he could. He and Layland would play doubles tennis with Veronica and Helen. The girls would always win because Layland had a lack of hand-eye coordination that caused him to swing several seconds after the ball had passed him, and Griffin was frequently hit in the face with balls, mostly because he was staring at Veronica. Layland enjoyed hanging around Veronica because it gave him the title of First BFF, which granted him complete immunity from cleaning anything up.

Frequently, Helen and Elly would join them for video games or poker, where they would bet using some warheads that President Carr had given to Veronica for her birthday. (He was running short on time and wanted to get his beloved daughter something big, rare, and explosive.) For a second, Griffin began to think that this might be a great way to start off the Albanian nuclear program—by having one of their spies win warheads in a poker game with the first daughter—but he forgot about that as soon as Layland slyly suggested that they changed the game to strip poker. All the girls threw their milkshakes at him and left the room.

Griffin also began to swim laps in the pool with Veronica and Layland, who sort of went wherever Griffin went because he realized that, after the strip poker faux pas, he was not going to get invited anywhere by a girl unless he tagged along with someone who had been invited. Griffin had trained himself to the point where seeing Veronica in a bathing suit did not put him into a coma, but all the same, Vice President Phillips preferred to have Hin Shoi, the macho Asian butler who was known for his skill in not dropping objects, help him with his weights.

It was definitely a time of liberty and exhilaration for Griffin. All that spy work was behind him, and he had left it for a new life with a wisecracking roommate and a goddess in a house that cost more to maintain daily than the Albanian National Treasury had accrued in a century. He felt tranquil and happy—which was quite a difference from his previous life, where he was simply rushing around doing practice missions. It wasn't boring per se, but it didn't provide the carefree enjoyment of playing video games with

Layland and Veronica, or the weightless euphoria he got when Veronica hugged him. He didn't miss it at all. He liked his new life, and as far as he was concerned, did not want to change it, except for a possible slight change involving him and Veronica getting married.

One day, though, Veronica and her father had gone to an all-day photo-op in a Maryland community ravaged by tornadoes, so Griffin and Layland were relegated to normal butler duties again. One of the president's top aides had had a bad crab cake for an early dinner and had been sick all over his office floor, and Griffin, who had not wisely disappeared into a nearby closet like Layland, had been sent to clean it up. When he returned, Layland was waiting for him.

"Dude," whispered Layland. "Veronica's back, and I got a copy of *Insanely Violent Multiplayer Massacre Slayer Death Kill XIII*—don't ask me how—and we should totally go to the game room and play it. I'll get her over there if you can get the game—it's on my dresser in the room."

He had had Griffin from 'Veronica'. Griffin was nodding like a hungry dog at the promise of a biscuit or designer slippers.

"OK then," said Layland. "See you in five."

Griffin dashed off in the direction of the room, taking care to avoid signs that James was near—normally this was indicated by deep footprints on the carpets where James had had recent foot-stomping tantrums, a common occurrence for James. He slunk down the hallway, keeping his head low, hoping to look like an intern or a paparazzo. He stopped at the door to his room, shoved the key into the lock in a ferocious way that would have made Layland say 'That's what she said!' and turned it quickly. The door swung open.

The Man wasn't trying to scare anyone. Jumping out from the shadows...he had to admit, it was amusing to see people's frightened faces when he snuck up on them, but that was not the purpose for which he had come to Griffin's room and taken a seat on the air conditioner directly across from the door.

The Man had been watching *Gossip Girl* earlier in the day when his cell phone—very useful communication device, why those wasteful games and ringtones were stored on it he would never know—buzzed eagerly. The Man snapped off the television and saw a text from Kopil, who had not yet mastered the art of the text message.

**ALMOST TIME TO KILL PRESIDENT STOP PLEASE FIND BOY AND  
RETRIEVE PROGRESS UPDATE STOP REPORT BACK TO ME STOP**

The Man had sent an affirmative reply, and a message to Kopil's secretary — this was, what, his thirty-ninth? — reminding her to teach the man the difference between a text message and a telegraph.

He had then rushed to the White House, flashed a press ID he had bought off Ebay, and slipped past a guard down to the corridor where the boy's room was.

He had hidden in the closet for a little while, but got out when he heard the boy coming down the hall. He knew it was the boy because of the footsteps. They were calm, brisk, light and measured—the footsteps of a spy. He didn't want to scare the boy, and besides, the closet was a little stuffy, so he had positioned himself on the air conditioner.

Griffin started anyway. After the events of the past few weeks, The Man was the scariest thing he could have seen—he represented a world where the closest thing to fun was your adrenaline pumping as you shot people with paintball guns, and where Triscuits were forbidden instead of free for the taking. In the back of his mind, he had been vaguely aware that someday he would have to conform to that lifestyle again—but he wasn't ready. He emitted a little shriek.

The Man was surprised. Albanian spies were taught to only have one fear—failure. He couldn't see any failures—the room wasn't exactly the Ritz, or even the Super 8, but he had spent a few hours in it without screaming. The Man looked down and at his clothes—it was a drab workout ensemble, but it didn't scream failure. At least he had left his Gossip Girl shirt at home. That would really give the boy something to scream about.

"Why are you so tense?" he snapped. "Calm yourself."

Griffin felt Veronica's warm smile and Layland's boisterous laugh rushing away like inner-city WASPs from a hicktown hunting party or Klan meeting. He reluctantly found himself saluting—it was like a reflex. "Sorry, sir," he mumbled.

The Man glowered. "Speak up."

"Sorry, sir."

The Man looked him over. "Tuck in your shirt."

Griffin tucked in his shirt. The Man scanned him over and over again like the broken scanner at Kmart that won't work and holds up the line for 10 minutes. He was trying to find something wrong with Griffin so that he could berate him in some way or another, because he enjoyed berating others. It gave him power, which he wanted very much. Incidentally, it was something that most of the people he wanted to berate *had*, thus making it an extremely bad decision to berate them. Griffin, in fact, was the only person he had been able to berate in several months.

"You're too tall," decided The Man, who was 6' 3". "That's horrible. You won't last a second in your mission. How do you expect guards not to see you?"

Griffin instinctively dropped into a crouch. It was a mildly pitiful crouch, though. He hadn't crouched in a while. Come to think of it, he hadn't done much that would have impressed The Man, unless The Man was a fan of Homicidal Slayer Slaughter Massacre Kill Death III. Griffin doubted he was.

"You're going to die," The Man gloated, planning out his scathing message to Kopil, asking why *he* hadn't gotten the job. "You're going to fail, and the entire country will hate you."

Normally, these words would send Griffin into convulsions. However, he had stopped listening to The Man and was now picturing Veronica in a bikini.

The Man saw that Griffin's mind was elsewhere and grew irate. "ARE YOU PAYING ATTENTION?" he barked, turning Griffin's head so he was staring directly into his eyes.

Griffin heard maybe the first few words of The Man's rant about how his first duty was too his country and a good spy blah blah blah blah. His attention wandered again and he began to count The Man's eyelashes. The Man's eyelashes were exceptionally long, Griffin noticed. There were an abundance of them, too. He had never realized the human eye had so many lashes. He admired how they curved up at the ends. They—

"PAY ATTENTION!"

Griffin saluted, placing his hand approximately 2 centimeters from where it was supposed to stand. It took all The Man's resolve not to reach out to the hand and relentlessly crush it until it was a pulpy mess. He instead gripped Griffin's hand with two

fingers, and, his knuckles white and shaking, slowly inched Griffin's hand to the proper position. Then he drew back, with a look of true resentment on his face.

"A SALUTE GOES LIKE THIS!" he bellowed furiously, his spittle splashing onto Griffin's face like detergent at a car wash. He then demonstrated the proper salute, flourishing his hand as his nose twitched in pure fury. "NOT LIKE THIS!" he shrieked, crossing his eyes while flinging his hand well away from where the proper position was.

James was patrolling the halls, looking for anything out of order. The White House was his domain, and he was not about to let an unstraightened photograph cast a stain on the gleaming perfection of this house he worked so hard to clean. Normally he would have a crew that would do this for him, or better yet, carry him on a chair while he pointed out unstraightened photographs, but ten people had quit on him in the past week—the cheek of these people was unfathomable! So what if he had taken away their pay for a month for leaving a room undusted? No one, it seemed to James, really understood, did they? He wasn't even from this country, and he understood. Maybe, he thought, these Americans took their White House for granted. Well, under his watch, it would be a statue to be admired and enjoyed, a representation of the wonders that the filthy country would have had if someone had gone back in time and shot the degenerates who created McDonalds and texting and the Disney Channel. It seemed he was the only one who cared anymore about making the house of the most important man in the United States look like it was the house of the most important man in the United States.

That shouting from the servants' quarters, he decided, would surely not do. In the white house, only the president should be allowed to shout at people, James thought.

He marched down the corridor towards the room Griffin shared with Layland. His gate was stiff, like he had a family of weasels living in his pants who would not allow him to bend his knees.

The shouting from the servants' quarters became more and more annoying as James drew closer. "I swear," James muttered to himself, "Idiots who disturb other people like that ought to be shot in the head."

Those were his last words, because as soon as he flung open the door, sneering in anticipation, The Man flicked out his gun and shot James in the head.

The gun had a silencer on it, so if anyone had heard anything at all, it had been no louder than a clap, and they had made up some validation for it, a book clattering to the floor, and went back to windexing the glass tables, as James had ordered.

"Idiots who disturb other people like that ought to be shot in the head," said The Man reproachfully, clicking his tongue.

Griffin, however, was terrified. He had never seen a dead human before. He hadn't seen The Man for three weeks. He didn't know which was scarier. All he knew that James was on the ground, dead, a puddle of blood spreading away from his body like a determined graduate student setting out to conquer the world, or at least the floor of Griffin and Layland's room. He knew that James was gone, dead, forever, and that this was wrong and shouldn't be happening. Griffin felt uncomfortable and out of place. The Man looked at him.

"YOU'RE SHOWING EMOTION!" screamed The Man in relentless anger. "STOP SHOWING EMOTION!"

Griffin forced his fingers to perch by his forehead like tentative parakeets, in the correct position this time. "Yes, sir."

"I'll call you when it's time," said The Man, who climbed out the window and vanished into the night like a contact lens into the grass.

## 16

Griffin had been interviewed no less than thirty-six times by no more than seven people, who always repeated the same questions every time, but found out nothing. They saw through Griffin's lies like a blind man sees through a brick wall—that is to say, not at all. Griffin decided that it was a wonder there hadn't been more presidential assassinations.

Or maybe there could've been, he thought, because a clean-up team had gone in and out of there in six minutes and left the place looking better than before. All they needed to do was find a suitable clone and no one would know about the dead guy.

But Griffin saw no clones. Of course, that didn't mean they weren't there. *A lot of things are missing here, Griffin thought. The murder weapon is gone. I know where it went, but it's still gone. The motive isn't here. The fingerprints aren't here.*

He sighed to himself as he watched the clueless investigators examine unrelated objects such as Layland's alarm clock. The quick mess of putting the bullet in James' brain and the quick, efficient sterilization that followed reminded him that his life was not about laughing with Layland and hugs from Veronica. His job was to keep the death toll up and rise through the ranks of his country.

But his motivation no longer felt the same, like switching to a different brand of macaroni and cheese because all the local grocery stores no longer sold your favorite kind that you'd been eating for seventeen years. He could no longer get passionate about his work. He had to force himself to believe in it, which was not hard before, but now there was a little voice in Griffin's head—a snippy, obnoxious voice that he had never heard before—asking stupid questions such as "Do you really want to die?"

*It is your job to serve your country and do your duty, Griffin reminded himself, And whether the deed is cold-blooded or not should not matter, as long as it is of service to the great nation of Albania.*

*No it isn't, whined the obnoxious little voice. This is stupid. I just wanna have some fun.*

*You must concentrate on your job, Griffin thought, gritting his teeth. Killing people is your job.*

*And cleaning toilets is Layland's job, said the voice. Look how good a job he does with that, and look how happy he is! Besides, isn't it wrong to kill people?*

*You must listen to your superiors,* Griffin admonished.

*The guy who watches Gossip Girl all the time and has a tantrum when you don't salute the right way? How the hell is he superior to you?*

"Hey, kid," said the Secret Service Agent, snapping his fingers. "Focus here. We need the facts."

*I have given you the facts thirty-five times,* thought Griffin. But he bit his lip, his teeth digging into his lips like an E! News Reporter digging into a starlet's extramarital affairs, and gave the facts for the thirty-sixth time.

Finally, the Secret Service decided that they had had the facts repeated for them sufficiently. They allowed him to leave.

"Stay where we can find you should we need to speak with you again," said one of the agents. From the way he looked when he said it—his face showed a degree of boredom Griffin had never seen before in his life—and the fact that he started falling asleep on the shoulder of the Secret Serviceman next to him after he had finished, Griffin decided that no one would be speaking to him again.

Griffin strode out of the room, noticing that his gait had changed—it was now rigid and purposeful, even though he wasn't walking for any purpose except to get out of the room. He thought about switching over to a lope or a shuffle or a saunter, but then he remembered The Man flicking out the gun and shooting James. He decided it was best that he walk the way The Man would have wanted him to, so that he could avoid being shot unnecessarily for not walking properly.

Griffin thrust his chest out and walked around like he was on a mission to nowhere in particular. He quickly realized that he was not going to get assigned some work this way, because the man who did all the assigning was now dead. He decided he might as well head over to the cafeteria and see if it needed cleaning.

He saw Layland on his way there. Layland was doing something that looked like an Irish step dance, if the Irish step dancer happened to be on crack and not know how to Irish step dance.

"Ding dong, the witch is dead," he sang off-key. When he spotted Griffin, he stopped abruptly, crashing into one of the tables and knocking loose an ancient painting, which he plopped haphazardly on a decorative table like a cell phone bill that you never ever ever want to read. "Dude!" he shouted, running up to Griffin and locking

him into a bear hug that was so tight it seemed he meant to absorb Griffin through his pores. "Did you hear, man? James got shot and died. Man, I thought that stuff just happens in spy novels! Do you know what this means, bro? Know what this means? I tell ya—no work for, well, until they find someone to get him! That's at least a couple hours!" He paused for a second. "Hey, wait. You ditched us! Around the times James died. You went to get the game and never came back!"

Griffin paled. Layland had found him out. He was putting two and two together and Griffin's cover would be blown. He would be taken away—away from Veronica, away from Layland, away from video games with names like Homicidal Slayer Slaughter Massacre Kill Death III, away from free food any time he wanted it—and placed in a dark cell where large CIA brutes would use 'enhanced interrogation techniques' on him. In Albania, each spy went through a weekly interrogation training session where their heads were slammed into the wall and whatnot, but Griffin was out of practice. He wondered how long he would hold up. Maybe Veronica would come with him and hold his hand.

Layland saw Griffin turn white and his eyes widened, a realization hitting him like a penny dropped from the top of the Empire State Building. "Oh, hell, dude," he said. "You found him, didn't you?" He hesitated for a minute, then clumsily patted Griffin on the shoulder. "There, there," he said awkwardly.

Layland wasn't sure about what he could do in this situation. His psychology skills were quite limited. His comforting skills were even more limited—they went about as far as restraining himself from saying 'Was it fun to watch him bleed?'. He couldn't say any soothing words about how James lived a long, full life—unless you counted walking around yelling at people and commanding them to dust things as a life—because he, well, he would never have anything nice to say about James, or about anyone who ordered him to clean things. He racked his brain for something he was familiar with that could help Griffin.

"I know," he grinned. "Let's get some food. That'll make you feel better."

"We've got work we need to do."

Layland had never seen a dead person, but he guessed from the way Griffin was acting that it messed with your head in the weirdest ways. This would likely be the only vacation they'd have for awhile—knowing the grumpy woman who worked for President

Carr, Anne or Fran or whoever, they'd probably hire someone even *worse* than James. This was their chance to take a spin in a secret service van, to see if they could sneak up onto the roof, to take a leak in the rose garden or try and make the secret service men who stood, not moving, outside of the white house laugh without touching them (Layland had learned the hard way that this was a bad way to win the game after tickling one of them—worst idea ever). "Dude, don't be ridiculous," he said, walking to the kitchen and motioning for Griffin to follow. "Let's eat, and then we'll find Veronica and we'll all do something awesome."

Griffin obediently marched behind him. "Yes, sir."

Layland thought people recovered from grief much quicker than this. "What is *wrong* with you, bro?" he asked. "Loosen up! Put this stuff about James—" he jerked his thumb over his shoulder like a disinterested groom suggesting a place for the beautiful ice sculpture, "Put it behind you. Don't...let it control you, OK? 'Cuz there's a whole new world out there with video games and Veronica and...stuff, so just, like, move on. It's time to move on." He was proud of himself for using a psychological phrase. He was certainly moving up in the world.

Griffin initially decided that his cover was going to be blown unless he did not pretend to want to have fun again. Five seconds into pretending to want to have fun, he realized that he actually wanted to have fun, hanging with Veronica and Layland and Veronica again for good measure, shooting people's heads off in a video game instead of in real life. He raced Layland to the kitchen, winning easily, and ate more food than he probably should have. They grabbed a bag of marshmallows out of the cupboard—President Carr insisted that his cooks make their own, custom-made marshmallow fluff—and tried to see who could stuff the most marshmallows into his mouth. Griffin won, and Layland spat his marshmallows onto the floor in disgust. Stray flecks of marshmallow flew everywhere like the dancing flakes of a raging blizzard. Griffin followed suit.

They left without cleaning it up. Griffin gave Layland a high-five and wondered how he had survived back in Albania.

"Where's Veronica?" Griffin wondered aloud. *She would have had a great time with us*, he thought. *And she would've won the contest. And if she wouldn't have, I'd have let her.*

“Oh! Dude,” said Layland. “I didn’t tell you? She went out to the stables. I thought you were so into her you put in a GPS chip so that you’d always know where she was.” He chuckled at his own joke, pretending it was good. “You might want to actually do that, so you don’t ask me where she is every ten freaking minutes!” he yelled, as Griffin sped off towards the stables

Griffin slowly edged the door to the stables open, because it had occurred to him that Veronica wore different pants to ride than she did day-to-day. And if she wore different pants, that meant she would have to change them somewhere along the line, didn't she? And he didn't want to walk in on...well, he couldn't say he didn't, but he wouldn't want to have an awkward situation. So he settled for just edging the door open, so she could tell him to get out if she was changing her pants, or not say anything if she wasn't. Or, said a little part of Griffin's mind, grinning devilishly like a kindergartener plotting a revenge scheme likely involving a dragon, maybe the door would *accidentally* open a little too fast before she had a chance to say anything. He eased it open quickly, looking around inside.

Veronica did have her pants on. She was swallowing as she stared at the haunches of her horse, running a brush through its hair over and over and over. Her eyes were red-rimmed, and she didn't see Griffin at all.

Griffin tried to make his presence known. "A-hem!" He stepped loudly on a pile of hay, eliciting a crunch from the flimsy straws that broke under his foot.

Veronica's head whipped over to face him. Strands of her flying hair were framed in the light of the window for a brief moment, and Griffin took note of them before they came to rest softly on her face.

Her eyes were *really* red, he noticed. So was her face. Her lips were a shade of pink that was nearly red, but then again, they were always that color. He wondered if her teeth were red, but she wasn't smiling, so he wouldn't be able to tell. She felt badly, or at least she seemed to—he could tell that much. Maybe she's not sad, he tried to tell himself. Maybe it was just some sort of allergic reaction to the horse's mane, or something. Maybe she took a red marker and colored around her eyes because she was bored--but not even he believed his that He wanted to put his arm around her, tell her it would be OK, whisper that he would always be there for her and she would never had to feel bad again.

He settled for "Um...what's up?"

She smiled for a fleeting second, like the sun when it tauntingly blinks out from behind the clouds on a cloudy day and then disappears, making you long for its return

even more. Griffin noticed that her teeth were not, in fact, red, or any other abnormal color for that matter.

"Hey, Griffin." She faked enthusiasm, but her voice had a heavy, melancholy weight to it. "I'm actually glad you came down here." She said that as if she meant it. But *actually*? Griffin's mind analyzed a thousand possibilities of the word 'actually', all of which did not end positively for him. "Will you ride with me?" she said, gesturing to a white horse in the corner whose glory days were sometime during the Taft administration. The horse seemed perfectly content to try and decide whether the stall door was food and then eat it anyway. But nothing, not even the horse's lethargy and the size of the teeth marks it left in the wood, could have prevented Griffin from saying yes.

He bounded over to the horse, which was conveniently pre-saddled. Griffin put his foot in the stirrup and hopped on, swinging his leg over the horse's body and landing effortlessly, proof that he had retained at least some of the agility lessons taught at the academy.

"His name's Chipper," Veronica announced dully, looking at the ground. This was unlike her, Griffin decided. He wondered if the horse would know what was wrong. Chipper just smiled amicably and checked to see if Griffin's pants were food.

"Are you all right, Veronica?" asked Griffin.

"I'm fine," said Veronica, tilting her head back and gulping, then blinking back tears that made her pupils like beautiful coral reefs visible just under the pale water. Griffin wanted the tears to come back, and then he didn't, and then he did just once so that he could take a picture so he could always see the coral reefs. "Actually..." she took a breath, "I sorta wanted someone to talk to. Like, about James. And you're a good listener, and I know you care, so yeah. Would you mind?"

In Griffin's mind, the gunshot was replayed over and over again, the quick, cold movements of The Man as he snatched James' life away from him like a mugger snatches a purse. He saw it through his own eyes, as he stood there, powerless to help, as his friend, his boss, his *conspirator*, obliterated James--and now it was making Veronica cry. Griffin didn't want to talk about it. Griffin didn't want to hear about it. He wanted to go back to the cafeteria and have more marshmallow-eating with Layland. But he looked at Veronica, with her red eyes and slumped shoulders, yet with her head

held high regally, and he decided that he couldn't leave her while she felt like this. Seeing her sad hurt him too much. He wanted to make her feel better, to tell her it was going to be all right. He wanted to put his arm around her like he'd seen those people do in those movies on the cheesy TV channels Layland always flipped to when a commercial came on.

Then again, Griffin wondered as Veronica pressed the button that commanded the stable's sliding electronic doors to grind open, why would she even want to talk to *him* about this? He couldn't say anything or give good advice. The whole thing might have even been his fault. It felt wrong being the one she talked to about this. He felt unworthy of her attention.

Veronica sighed, looking out at the orchard, where the trees were in full midsummer bloom, a symphony of colors with the giant flag in the background waving around animatedly, their conductor. "I just can't believe it," she said quietly.

Griffin could, and for a good reason. He thought about it. "He died happy," he lied.

Griffin was normally not the underestimating type, but Veronica knew as well as he did that people who are being shot are customarily unhappy. She just nodded. Her eyes welled up again, overflowing up like a kiddie pool does when the mother who is filling it realizes that little Ryan is setting fire to the couch and runs inside, leaving the hose in the pool.

"So...do you wanna talk about it?" asked Griffin tentatively.

She nodded quickly. "Uh-huh. Thanks." She paused. "I'm sorry I'm making you deal with all this. I mean, it must be hard for you to remember it."

*If only you knew*, thought Griffin. "No, it's...it's fine. Whatever makes you feel better. You know."

She absentmindedly stroked her horse's mane. Griffin decided to stroke his horse's mane as well. *When in Rome, do as the Romans do*, he thought.

Veronica wiped her eyes on the back of her hand. Tears formed rivers between the mountains that were her knuckles. "I mean...it's just so unfair..."

Griffin nodded, trying to reek of empathy.

Veronica stared off into the distance, beyond the skyline of DC where the bloodsuckers sucked blood, beyond the suburbs where the people who worked for the

bloodsuckers went back to their families, beyond the clouds where the bloodsuckers flew on their private jets, pondering something that seemed to be just out of her grasp. "I mean," she continued sadly, turning to face Griffin, "I knew you guys didn't like him—at all, you know? Because he yelled at you, and he made you do stuff all the time. And, like, I understand that." She paused for a minute, taking a sudden strong interest in a blade of grass. "But...he was a good guy. Good enough, I mean. He was...he was great to me, he'd always leave those little mints on my pillow, like they do in the hotels...and, I mean, he'd, like, bow to me in the halls, it was this little joke we had..."

Griffin tried to picture James bowing for someone. He was not able to do it, and started picturing the squirrels that scampered on the branches of the trees in flower-print dresses. "I can bow for you if you want," he offered consolingly. "And I can find some mints. I think Layland hides some in the room." Griffin didn't know for sure if Layland was in possession of any mints, but given the amount of goods that Layland customarily hoarded, there were bound to be some mints somewhere in the room.

She smiled reservedly at him, blinking tears out of her eyes. "Thank you, Griffin...I mean, that's really sweet. But, I mean, this isn't about...like, it's just about James. I mean, it's just not fair!" She started hiccupping loudly. Griffin had always imagined Veronica's crying to be soft, heaving, melodious sobs, but it was more of a discordant mismatch of gasps, sighs and high-pitched squeals, like a bunch of first graders five minutes after they decide to start a band and five minutes before they realize that none of them can play any instruments.

Griffin opened his mouth to say something, then closed it, then opened it again. "Uh...shhhh."

Veronica obediently brought down the volume.

"It's OK," he whispered. His hand stretched out indecisively like a shy little man who thought he saw someone famous and wanted to ask them for their autograph but wasn't sure, and what if he made a fool of himself? He started to pull his hand back, but thought better of it and shot it out again, stiffly patting Veronica on the shoulder. She offered a weak smile. He withdrew his hand. He decided he'd try something he'd seen on Oprah when the cooks played it in the kitchen. "Just let it all out," he soothed, omitting the 'honey' because this was not the time or place.

Griffin learned quickly to be careful what he asked for, because Veronica's gargles and high-pitched hiccups became twice as loud. She sobbed into the mane of her horse, hooking her fingers in its matted brown hair and making her hands into fists so that if she fell off, she would take a large chunk of horse hair as a souvenir.

Veronica gulped. "So," she quavered, "You were, like, you were the one who found James, right? So you were like the first one to see him...like...?"

"Apart from the guy who killed him," said Griffin quickly. "The guy who killed him saw him dead first. And I was not around when that happened."

"Yeah, but...I mean, you saw him...deceased before anyone, like, touched him, or took the money out of his wallet, or anything. What...what was it like? I mean, what did he look like?"

"He looked like James," said Griffin, "Except, well, he was...dead. He was...cold, and white. And there was a lot of blood."

"Oh!" Veronica shuddered, like a politician being forced to watch videos of people in court being sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth so help them God.

"I mean...but he was...he was peaceful," said Griffin. "Like, he looked...resting. Like he was sleeping."

Veronica was silent for a moment. "It's just not fair."

"What?"

"You know, that people like that get killed! He was a nice guy—I mean, nice enough, and he loved his job, and, I mean, I'm just thinking, why does all that have to get taken away?"

"It's...that's terrible," mumbled Griffin. "Not fair at all."

"It's just...not why do people have to die, you know, that's, like, the circle of life and stuff, but, like...why do people have to...MAKE other people die? When they're not ready? I mean, we can talk about what's important but in the end life is the most important thing because it gives us...it, like, lets us have all these important things, and I don't understand why anyone would just...!" She buried her face in the horse's neck. It gave a brief whinny of displeasure—or maybe pleasure, Griffin couldn't tell which.

"It's...it's really tough," Griffin agreed. *Is that all you can say?* He internally yelled at himself, the words bouncing around in his brain like rubber shotgun pellets. "That

shouldn't happen," he added consolingly. *Wow*, he mocked himself. *Three extra words. FanTAStic.*

"I mean...I'm really sorry I'm telling you all this, and that, you know, that I'm bothering you...I mean, it's..."

"It's fine," said Griffin, even though it wasn't. "Say whatever you like."

"I mean, I was just thinking...why would people do that? I mean, what kind of...of monster thinks its OK to just...you know, life is, like, so great, and then just take that AWAY from people? I mean, who would...why would they do that to someone who never really did anything to them? I mean, they'd obviously not have to care about anyone...I mean, I just wonder WHY it's got to—"

Griffin felt guilt slowly gnawing at him like a five year old kid taking small bites of a chocolate Easter bunny, trying to make it last. He knew he had to stop everything before the kid took a big bite. "I agree!" he interrupted. "That's...that's very horrible and you're absolutely right."

She stopped, blinked the tears out of her eyes, and stared up at Griffin sadly. "Oh my God, I'm so sorry...I've been going psycho on you."

"No, you haven't!" Griffin insisted. After training with Sir and Kopil for years, he knew what psycho was.

"Thank you so much for letting me vent," she said, smiling. "You're like a sponge, you just...you just sit there and soak it all up, you don't say a word."

Griffin did not enjoy being compared to a kitchen appliance by the girl he liked, but she was smiling, so it was all right, he decided.

"You're a really good listener," she said, then sniffed. It was a beautiful sniff, thought Griffin, but then again, he had been listening to the fire-engine sobs and the dying-fish gulping for a while now. "Thanks."

She reached for towards the side of Griffin's horse. Griffin pulled his hand out of the way to let her feel the matted hair of the animal, but her hand followed his like an obsessive fan follows U2.

She was surprised as he was when she reached out and grabbed it. It was really just a spur-of-the-moment thing—Griffin was sweet, sure, but she wasn't totally sure she was, you know, into him...but there was something going on, as they were talking,

that she really couldn't explain, and as their fingers groped around to fit into each other's grooves and intertwine, she decided it felt right, somehow.

Griffin looked at her, open-mouthed. "You...I...hands...what?"

Veronica, at a loss for words like a Miss American contestant who's been asked a question above the third grade level, just smiled and gripped his hand tighter.

Griffin smiled back and fainted dead away, falling off his horse.

Anne paced. She wondered if it was therapeutic. It didn't seem to make her feel any better. She couldn't imagine that it was helping the rug, either. The path of blue fuzz that she was repeatedly treading on was looking shorter than the other blue fuzz. Anne wondered why she was concerning herself with the height of certain blue fuzz when she was an advisor to one of the most powerful men in the world, leading a damage control meeting.

"We could lie," suggested Kritz. "We could say it was a suicide. Those things happen all the time, right? I mean, this is Washington. Heh heh."

Every single pair of eyes in the room glared at him. Kritz's attempts at humor were less successful than an average hippopotamus's attempts at flying. There actually weren't many pairs of eyes—just Anne's, Vice President Phillips', and Demps'. The chief of staff was still in the Bahamas, and the President hadn't been invited. He hadn't even been told of the meeting.

"We're not going to lie to the American people," said Vice President Phillips.

"Why not?" chattered Kritz, who did not understand the concept of ceasing to dig when one finds oneself in a hole. "I mean, this is Washington. Heh heh."

He found himself being glared at again.

"There has to be a way we can downplay this, though," Anne said, rubbing her temples like the Indians rubbed sticks together to create a spark. There was a White House betting pool going for how soon Anne would set her own face on fire.

"Our men can't look bad," intoned Demps. "We must be respected and trusted if we want to be taken seriously, and if we want to do our job right, we have to be taken seriously." No one was in a position to argue. After all, he had a gun in his pocket.

"So," Anne mused, squinting at the potted plant to see if some solution were written on the artificial leaves, "We need to write a truthful press release to the public that gives them the facts and the confidence that the government is telling the truth without making them think that they or the president are not secure."

"Take notes," barked Demps to Kritz. Kritz whipped out a pad and pencil. He dropped them both and picked them up off the floor, apologizing nervously. By the time he was done, everyone in the room had figured out ten different ways to write the press release and then forgotten them.

"I think we've got to somehow put a spin on this," said Vice President Phillips, who had a penchant for stating the obvious, since that was all that he knew how to state.

"Of course we will," giggled Kritz nervously. "I mean, this is Washington. Heh heh."

"Out." Demps meant it.

"Sorry! Sorry sorry sorry sorry sorry. I'll leave you alone. I can assure you it won't happen again," said Kritz as he scurried out of the room, leaving behind a package of cough drops that Demps threw out the window.

"Now someone else is going to have to write the press release," admonished Vice President Phillips, in a tone that said very clearly *It's not going to be me*.

Anne, realizing the task ultimately fell to her, cursed under her breath. "It won't be easy to sell this one to the American people," she said, by which she meant the American people who would wave signs and call their local radio shows. No one else in the room really cared what the other American people thought.

"Someone's gonna need to reassure the staff that they're safe," intoned Demps.

"You," said Anne, almost defiantly.

"I'm not good with public relations," replied Demps coldly. As if to prove his point, he swept his dark glasses from his head and shot Anne a stony, piercing stare, like an Indian arrowhead. She felt less safe than a rabbit in the middle of a demolition derby. Anne made a mental note to dump off the job to one of her underlings.

"How's this affecting the President?" asked Vice President Phillips.

"If a giant bullfrog ate the roof, the President wouldn't be affected by it," said Anne dryly. Vice President Phillips, attempting to conjure the image of a bullfrog carrying off the roof of the White House, promptly shut up.

The door banged against the wall and bounced back before anyone even noticed it had opened. President Carr stood on the other side with his foot extended. He grinned elatedly when he realized that his kick worked. His dress shirt had ketchup stains on it, which was odd, given that he had had donuts for both breakfast and lunch.

"Watcha guys talkin' about?" he bounded over eagerly to the group, pulling out the chair with the most padding and sinking into its cushion like the Titanic into the frosty sea. Anne and Demps edged away from him like lifeboats searching for safety.

"Nothing," replied Anne quickly.

"Nothing," deadpanned Demps.

"Hey, buddy!" exclaimed Vice President Phillips, clapping President Carr on the back. "We were just talking about the James issue."

"The James who what?"

Vice President Phillips, not noticing Anne banging her head against the wall, continued on.

"James. The head butler."

"Oh, him. You know what he did? I thought he was such a good guy—always helping out, always there, always dependable. But he didn't come in and change my sheets today! What kind of dedication is that?"

"James was shot," said Vice President Phillips. "To death," he clarified. "Here, in this very building," he added.

"Oh, excuse me," said President Carr, who didn't care about whether or not he was excused. "Just because a guy gets shot I can't expect him to come in and change my sheets in the morning."

Anne's patience was decreasing rapidly, like a company's profits after the CEO takes half the money and runs to Zurich. "Well, tell me what we're going to do about this, Mr. President," she snapped. "If you know everything, then you obviously know what to say to the American people when they ask how danger could get so close to the President and would it strike again. You'd know how to boost the spirits of a staff that goes around afraid that someone will shoot them. Tell me what we're going to do."

Carr cocked his head and stared off into the distance like a birdwatcher with a neck cramp. He engaged in a moment of deep thought, then rose and nodded contemplatively in Anne's direction.

"We're going to have a Hawaiian shirt day."

"What?" shrieked Anne.

"Hawaiian shirt day!" cried the President, standing on top of the chair. "Spirits will be boosted! We will be brought together by colorful flowers and hula dancers and coconut!"

He jumped down off the chair.

“I am the decider! I have decided and made a decision, and my decisioning will ring throughout humanity!” He strode out the door confidently. “Luau! Tomorrow!” were his parting words.

Griffin was woken up by the chill from an air conditioner that had been turned up too high. He felt like he was in a refrigerator. He wondered why his head throbbed. He tried to remember things. He remembered Veronica. Was Veronica sitting in a strange room with her head throbbing too? He sat bolt upright at that thought. He had to make sure she was all right.

Layland always thought people took a while to wake up. He, as a routine, got up the third time someone told him to, then took ten minutes to roll out of bed before he would shuffle off to his assigned menial tasks. But here was Griffin, just flying out of bed like the dude who found the horse head in his bed in that mobster movie. "You wake up quick," he remarked.

Griffin blinked. The light was too bright and scorched his eyes. The room was sanitized. Everything was white—the cot he was on, as well as its sheets and pillow. Layland was like a mathlete on a football team, standing out in the jeans and hot pink punk-rock t-shirt for some band called Smite 401 that he had put on when he realized that there was going to be no work that day. "What the hell is going on?" asked Griffin frantically. He remembered Veronica's hands. Had she hit him? Was that why his head hurt? "Did Veronica hit me?" he asked.

"No, she hit *me*," said Layland, turning his head and gesturing at a fading pink mark on his cheek, "Because I made some joke about you falling off that horse." He paused and nodded reflectively. "It was a stupid joke, though," he said.

Griffin was pretty sure Layland deserved it. "Where's Veronica?" he asked.

"Earth," said Layland matter-of-factly.

Griffin was tempted to hit Layland as well. "Where on earth?"

Layland shrugged, his shoulders going up and down like the Dow, while Griffin looked on, a desperate investor searching for answers. "Somewhere around, I guess. She didn't want to leave, but some big-shot foreign dude came with his kid, and she needed to entertain her."

"Did she say where they were going?"

"I think they mighta said something about...um...tennis courts?"

Griffin got out of bed.

"I don't think you can do that," said Layland.

"You can't do that," said a doctor, poking his head in the door, confirming Layland's suspicions.

"I can't not do it," said Griffin. "I want to go see Veronica."

"You can't do that," said the doctor. "She can come here."

"She can't do that," said Layland. "He needs to go to her."

"He can't do that," said the doctor. "I need to run an MRI on him."

"You can't do that," said Layland. "I heard those things turned Tom Cruise into a robot."

"They can't do that," said the doctor. "I should know. I'm a doctor."

They both looked up to realize that Griffin was gone.

"He can't do that," pouted the doctor.

Griffin huffed up to the tennis courts with extra balls, towels, rackets, water bottles, a first aid kit (just in case), and complimentary mints (why not?). He could hear the tennis balls popping against the racket strings and girls laughing from the direction of the court. Veronica's laugh was purer than those of the other girls, whose laughs cracked and shattered liked dropped vases.

Griffin pushed through the gate. Secret servicemen stood stoically at the corners of the court like walls—always there, always sturdy, always dependable, and you just got so used to them that you forgot they were there, but if they were to disappear you wouldn't feel as comfortable. He waited politely for the girls to play out their point. Veronica had a vicious forehand, he noticed. She was playing with a girl he had never seen before. He guessed that she was the daughter of the 'big-shot foreign dude' Layland had mentioned.

On the other side of the court were Helen and Elly. Elly, whom Griffin thought would be well suited to a job that involved yelling at people, was directing Helen around the court. Helen, who was by far the better tennis player, was growing resentful of this, especially because Elly knew nothing about the game.

"Go to the x!" screamed Elly. "Double back! Sideline! Half! Shift down!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" screamed Helen.

"Cover over there!" Elly yelled.

Helen did as she was told. Veronica popped the ball off her strings, and it flew over the net, perfectly aimed at Elly's side of the court. Elly whacked at the ball with her

racket like a lumberjack whacks at a tree—and, just like a tree, the ball fell in front of her.

Helen, who had grown very irate, threw her racket down. "God, Elly!" she yelled. "Have you ever played tennis before in your life?"

"You don't need to have had to!" retorted Elly. "It's like riding a bike!"

"Have you ever ridden a bike before in your life?"

Veronica hurried over to calm things down, and the other girl followed. Griffin decided that, in times like these, complimentary mints couldn't hurt. He headed over.

"Griffin!" said Veronica, excited to see him. Elly and Helen pretended not to have noticed Griffin appear at all and simultaneously took out their phones and began texting.

"Did you see someone?" Elly asked Helen.

"I most certainly did not," Helen replied.

"Hey, c'mon, guys, you know Griffin," said Veronica. "Say hi."

"Sh!" said Helen. "I am getting a very important text that concerns the fate of the world."

"It's from Gandhi," added Elly.

"Gandhi's dead, stupid," snapped Helen like a lawyer who comes back from his lunch to find out that his new secretary has shipped all his legal files to Siberia.

"I don't know what's up with them," said Veronica to Griffin, shaking her head.

"Yeah," he said, equally mystified as they tap tap tappity tap tapped away at their cell phone keyboards.

"Gandhi is telling us very important things," said Elly by way of apology.

Veronica rolled her eyes and helped herself to the amenities that Griffin was holding. "Thank you SO much, Griffin," she said, taking large gulps from the water bottle. She closed it and wiped her mouth with one of the towels Griffin had brought. "Do you want some?" she asked the girl standing next to her, who shook her head politely and timidly drew back. "Griffin, this is Adelina," said Veronica. "Her dad's the prime minister of Albania." Adelina smiled a shy hello. "She doesn't speak English," said Veronica.

Reflexively, Griffin held out his hand and introduced himself in Albanian. A bit shocked, but pleased to find someone who spoke a language she could understand, Adelina took his hand and told him she was pleased to meet him.

The girls gaped at Griffin like suckers being told that the extended warranty on their phones was a sham. Elly and Helen's text-fest with Gandhi was completely forgotten. "You speak Albanian?" asked Veronica incredulously.

"Well...I mean, sort of..." said Griffin. "You know. Just a few words. That's really all I knew."

"That's really cool," swooned Veronica, at which point Elly and Helen simultaneously rolled their eyes and returned to texting Gandhi. "Where'd you learn how to do that?"

"Um...I just looked around on the...Internet. Yeah. Just some stuff from the Internet."

"You pulled off the accent really well too," she said, smiling at him. "You sounded just like her!"

"Anyone else want some water?" Griffin asked very quickly.

"Nope," said Elly, snapping her phone shut. "It throws off my game."

"Your game does a very good job of doing that by itself," said Helen dryly.

"You shut your mouth."

Griffin predicted another easy win for Veronica and Adelina. "Good luck," he said to them as they passed him on their way to their side of the court.

"Thanks." Veronica beamed at him. She jogged over to her baseline, pulled a ball from the pocket of her skirt, and sliced at it. It cut through the air like a flying machete, landing right next to Elly, who swung at it and hit it with all her might. It flew into the net and plopped back pitifully onto her side of the court. Helen swore like a NASCAR driver who finds a parking boot on his car just before the Indianapolis 500, but Griffin didn't hear it. He was entranced by Veronica's victory dance, in which she swayed her hips from side to side like the most beautiful pendulum in the world.

"Stop staring!"

Griffin whirled around to face Layland, who had made his way over from the doctor's office. So did Veronica, who had heard him wanted to know who was staring at what and why. Griffin was considering shoving a tennis ball down Layland's throat. He gave Layland a menacing look.

Menacing looks weren't a part of Griffin's training, but he was naturally adept at them nonetheless. Layland, who valued his tennis-ball-free windpipe more than anything

else that was at stake, very quickly formulated an excuse to explain his comment without incriminating Griffin. With only (he estimated) about one-tenth of a second to complete the action before Griffin became really irate, he let loose with the first thing he had.

"Ketchup."

"WHAT?" asked Griffin and Veronica, Helen, and Elly in unison. Adelina had already given up all hope of ever understanding any of them.

"What I said was, where's the ketchup?" asked Layland.

This satisfied the girls, who returned to their game.

"So," said Layland to Griffin, a little quieter, having learned his lesson, "You been staring at Veronica."

"Maybe," deadpanned Griffin.

"Dude," grinned Layland, "You so like her. You should totally ask her out."

"What?" shrieked Griffin. "Are you kidding?"

"Why the hell not, bro? You like her. People who like each other ask each other out. That's logic."

Griffin was not aware of any such logic. "I dunno. I mean, I want to..."

"Then you gotta man up and do it," commanded Layland, who had never asked anyone out himself, but knew that it was his masculine duty to force other males to do so.

"I can't. I'm...I'm too scared to do it. I mean, what if she says no?"

"Then she says no. You two'll still be friends! You think she wants to hang out with THEM all the time?"

At this he gestured to Helen and Elly, who were throwing their tennis rackets at each other.

"OK," relented Griffin.

"You got this," Layland said encouragingly.

"I want to do this," Griffin said confidently. "I can do it. I will do this."

He bravely strode out onto the court, like a Greek warrior, ready to do battle, whatever came at him.

What came at him was a tennis ball.

The thing about Greek warriors, mused Griffin as he lay dazed on the court with a funny feeling in his jaw, was that they never had to worry about Veronica's power serve.

"Oh my God!" Veronica rushed over to Griffin and knelt down. Elly and Helen ran over from their side of the court. Adelina, who had decided that letting a butler run out onto the court and hitting him with a ball was what the Americans meant when they said 'halftime show', decided to partake in the spectacle as well. She ran over next to Griffin and knelt down as well.

Normally Griffin would have enjoyed having Veronica stare at him, but of course, this was negated by the fact that he could not feel his jaw.

"Griffin, are you OK?" Veronica pulled him to his feet and helped him over to the side of the court.

Griffin, regaining a little bit of the feeling in his jaw, tried to take Layland's advice. "Hey, um...would—"

She gingerly touched his jaw. "Um...I wouldn't talk for awhile," she said. "I mean, I dunno, but you don't want to strain it or anything, right?"

"I'll be all right," he said, pretending to be brave in the face of insurmountable suffering (in reality, the pain in his jaw had slowed to a low throb). "Sorry for interrupting the game."

"Don't worry about it!" Veronica assured him. "I'm sure, like, lots of people run out onto courts in the middle of games and get hit."

Griffin doubted that this was a regular occurrence, but then again, sometimes he couldn't believe the things that regularly occurred in this country.

Veronica smiled sympathetically at him and scampered off towards the court. As soon as she did, Layland pounced on Griffin like a ravenous tiger.

"What was that, man?"

"I was trying to ask her out."

"By running right into the line of fire? She's not gonna want you to take her on a date to the freakin' emergency room, you idiot."

"Look...that was a mistake," said Griffin. "I'll go around next time, I swear."

"You better. You gotta just man up and do it," said Layland, who had, of course, never actually asked a girl out, but had read enough advice columns on the subject to feel that he was qualified to give orders.

"I will." Griffin was disgusted with himself. He was determined to march around the court and ask Veronica out. He stood up confidently—and then sat down, just as quickly. He didn't know why—an unknown force was acting upon him like he was a physics problem, sapping out his confidence and keeping him glued to his seat. How was he going to walk over there! To her! And how was he going to say that without keeling over dead from embarrassment?

Layland looked at him, puzzled. "Seriously, what's goin' on with you, man? You clean the bathrooms, you do all this stupid dusting and cleaning—ten times better than me, by the way. You're not scared of the grime and stuff. You stay away from, like, nothing. So why you so scared to ask out Veronica? Can you only tackle things that are sprayed with Lemon Pledge, or what?"

"Shut up. I'll do it." Griffin rubbed his hands together, as if he was preparing for a practice mission back home. But he wasn't up against special ops this time—he was up against another major enemy, rejection, and if it won, it would sink its sharp, mocking claws into his soul and rip it apart. Griffin was afraid that if she said no, he would keel over like the dying grandfather who always ruins family reunions by having a heart attack every freaking year.

Layland had started to cluck and flap his arms, circling around and around Griffin like an electric train that makes chicken noises. If there was one thing Griffin knew about electric trains that made chicken noises, it was that they didn't exist, so he ignored Layland and gathered his resolve.

It took him a while to gather his resolve. He would have liked to have additional time to dig a hole to hide in upon his impending rejection., but he didn't think he could dig one with a tennis racket, and Layland's chicken noises, which got louder by the second, were not ignorable anymore. Griffin decided he would do it now, or there was no hope of ever doing it again. Ever. Convincing himself of that, he ran—behind the court this time; he'd learned his lesson—over to Veronica.

Before he gave himself time to question what he was doing, Elly missed the ball and threw her racket at Helen in fury. Veronica turned away, not wanting to watch the fight, and saw Griffin standing right behind her.

“Would you want to go out with me?” The words spilled out of his mouth like slime spills out of a vat and onto a reality show contestant.

Veronica, who had learned long ago to do the opposite of her father in situations that required difficult decisions, resorted to careful thought in order to decide how best to proceed.

- ✓ Griffin was asking her out.
- ✓ Griffin was cute.
- ✓ Griffin was sweet.
- ✓ She sort of liked him.
- ✓ It would be much better than going to the movies with Elly and Helen. Last time, Elly had upended a popcorn bucket over Helen’s head, and all their popcorn had been lost. Griffin did not seem like the throw-a-popcorn-bucket-on-your-head type.

She considered those facts. She envisioned them going to the movies, kissing, him running his hand through her popcorn-free hair like a plow through a field of anything but corn.

She looked at him. He was cute, she decided, even if right now he was sweating from nervousness and shifting his weight from one foot to the other like a first grader who needed to pee. She thought first graders were cute as well. Not first graders who were growing facial hair, though.

He looked at her and lost more hope every second. What was that stare she was giving him, that ominous gaze? Was she going to do it—tear his heart out of his body like a coupon from a newspaper? Would she do it because she could, or because she didn’t love him? Which would be worse?

Veronica wondered why women didn’t grow facial hair. They had hair on their head, just like guys. More hair, in fact. Is that where their facial hair went? But what about guys with long hair? Some of them had beards, too.

Griffin just waited for it to come, like a nuclear blast, tearing him apart, his hopes, his dreams, everything he'd ever wished for except for his former goals at the academy.

There were a lot of hot movie stars that grew beards, thought Veronica. They looked scruffy and adorable when they did that. She loved Johnny Depp's beard. It was wonderful. She wished more movie stars had beards.

Griffin had given up. His hopes were crashing like an unmanned plane, plummeting into a field of despair and culminating in a pitiful fire of despondency. The people on board were screaming. So was he, in his head. Everything they had ever loved was about to be snatched away from them like Taylor Swift's microphone being snatched away by Kanye West. Everything Griffin loved, too, was about to go up in flames.

Veronica wondered if Tom Hanks had a beard. Didn't he have a beard in this new movie? She wondered. It was called Last Year, and it looked really good. Maybe she should ask Griffin to take her to it. Oh! She suddenly remembered. Griffin! He was waiting for an answer.

"Yes."

The newspaper coupon was glued back. MacGyver defused the nuclear bomb. The pilots returned from smoking in the airplane lavatory and regained control of the plane. Kanye West handed Taylor Swift back the microphone and sat down politely. Griffin was saved.

"Yes!" he nearly shouted.

"It's gonna be fun!" said Veronica. She shyly spread her arms and held them out, inviting him to hug her.

Griffin had no idea what he was supposed to do. Going with his gut instinct, he reached out as well and shook both of her outstretched hands. "Thanks."

Griffin would have stayed longer, but he saw Elly preparing to viciously whack the ball with all her strength. His jaw tingled, and, remembering the last time he had unwisely stepped in the path of a tennis ball, he rushed to the side of the court to rejoin Layland. Veronica smiled after him. From the back, he sort of looked like Johnny Depp, she mused.

President Carr, mused Anne as she tentatively opened the door to his office, was like a box of chocolates carved out of soap. You never knew what you were going to get, but you knew that it would repulse you and leave a bad taste in your mouth. She was wearing a gaudy Hawaiian shirt, as was the rest of the staff—President Carr had been adamant and had sent out no less than forty-seven memos, saying that anyone caught not wearing a Hawaiian shirt would face up to 5 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine (Anne had reminded him to stop getting arbitrary penalties from the FBI warnings on DVDs, but Carr wouldn't listen). So, needless to say, she was quite surprised when she entered the office to find Carr shirtless.

"Oh, hey, Anne," mumbled President Carr. He then dug into a cinnamon roll, which meant "shut the hell up and leave me alone".

Anne wasn't planning on leaving him alone. She was on a mission. But first, she needed to know why Carr was shirtless. "Um, Mr. President, where's your shirt?"

"On the floor," mumbled Carr, gesturing with a hand sticky from cinnamon roll icing. Indeed, his shirt was on the floor, along with a priceless wood carving that was a gift from the president of Cameroon, lying in a pile of Twinkie wrappers. Anne sighed, and picked them both up.

"But why aren't you wearing a Hawaiian shirt, Mr. President?" she asked. "It's Hawaiian shirt day, remember?"

President Carr furrowed his brow, rubbed his chin, crossed his eyes, and then uncrossed them. "Oh, yeah, that," he said. "Yeah...I was looking up 'Hawaii' on the internet, and I saw a bunch of people without any shirts on. But, yeah, here I am. No shirt. But lookit!"

He stood up, and Anne saw that he was wearing a grass skirt. He was also not wearing underpants. Anne shrieked and jumped back. She decided not to ask any more questions. Like a Greek warrior charging into battle, she attempted to move forward with her mission, but she couldn't get a certain image out of her mind. Anne was certain Greek warriors never had to look at President Carr's genitals.

"What's up, Anne? You look like you've seen one of those stupid family values commercials," said the president. In fact, the opposite was true, but Anne just nodded

numbly. The president took that as a sign that he was no longer needed and went back to surfing the Internet.

When Anne no longer felt nauseous, she stepped forward. "Mr. President?"

"*What?*" President Carr wondered where decency had gone and died these days. Anne, who was always lecturing him on his manners, having the gall to interrupt a game of Pac-Man, for crying out loud, was the first sign of the etiquette apocalypse.

"You need to sign these."

The ghost was getting closer to Pac-Man. Closer. Closer. President Carr navigated Pac-Man around a corner to put off the yellow orb's almost-certain death.

"*Mr. President!*"

The ghost ate Pac-Man.

"What?" screamed President Carr, who at this point was very annoyed. If Anne was going to kill icons of 80's popular culture, he would just have to fire her before she killed Madonna.

"You need to sign this," Anne said, thrusting out a stack of papers at him. She hoped that if she treated them like any other stack of papers he would sign them, the one stack of papers it actually mattered that he sign, without asking questions.

But President Carr was in a very argumentative mood. "What the hell is this?" he asked, looking at it like a Libertarian looks at the tax code.

"It's just...stuff. Here, if you sign it quickly, I'll let you call up a French government official who doesn't speak English and you can curse at him." This was a favorite practice of the president's before France threatened a nuclear war and Anne hastily discontinued it.

"Yeah, but what *is it?*" whined the president.

"It's a bill."

The President, feeling stupid for not seeing the words 'A bill' at the top and guessing as much, grew even more irritable. "I knew *that*," he snapped. "What's it about?"

"It's about giving children health insurance. Please, just sign it!" pleaded Anne.

President Carr was now even more irked, because he had not noticed that right under 'A bill' was written 'To provide health care to America's children'. Well, that settled

it. Not only were these stupid people responsible for the death of a pop culture icon, they were trying to trick him too.

"I won't sign it," he said stubbornly.

*Why this? Wondered Anne. Why now? Why with this one bill?* She supposed it was inevitable, like the fade of a glowstick over time. But there were always new glowsticks to buy. You couldn't buy the American people's support—well, that wasn't true. But glowsticks were cheaper.

"Sir, you need to sign this, or you'll face...great scrutiny from the rest of the country."

"Oh, please, Anne," huffed the president, rolling his eyes. "You don't know anything about anything." He was very proud of himself—delivering an effective insult and covering up the fact that he didn't know what 'scrutiny' meant, all in one sentence? He could hardly believe it.

"Sir!" Anne was ready to rip off his meaty, Pac-man maneuvering hands and shove them down his throat. "Just sign. Please. Your presidency depends on it."

If the President had a nickel for every time he had heard that phrase...actually, he hadn't heard it all that much. Maybe it was important. But then again, who did these people think they were? Telling him what to do. They'd been telling him what to do for years. He was the decider. He was going to decide. He was going to plant his foot on something, throw his head back, and, with the confidence of a used-car salesman, make a proclamation.

Anne was vaguely aware something was wrong, and then grew sure of it when President Carr put his computer on the floor and planted his foot on it. He threw his head back. Anne became very alarmed.

"I have a proclamation to make, as the decider," he said smoothly, almost as if he hadn't practiced that opening in the bathroom mirror before every UN meeting where he ended up meekly reciting a canned speech after Anne nixed most of his ideas (many of which involved strippers and other clothes-removing life-forms thereof). "Do you know the millions of tons of paper that are wasted in this country every year, Anne?" he bellowed.

*Oh Christ,* thought Anne. *Is he going where I think he is with this? Oh crap, he is. This is a new low point.*

"Anne, I want you to take this bill," admonished Carr. "Take it!" he commanded again, like a frustrated grocery bagger trying to hand a woman--who has been standing in line obliviously talking on her cell phone for thirty freaking minutes--her bag full of groceries.

Anne took it, seething.

President Carr was reaching the important part of his proclamation. Pride lifted him into the air like a baseball team carrying their manager on their shoulders after winning the pennant in deciding and proclamation-giving. "And sew it!" he bellowed, "Into a blanket!"

Anne did not like where this was going.

"Give it to a fellow member of mankind suffering out on the streets!" continued the President, swelling with self-importance like an ankle swells after an injury. "This I have decided, because I am the decider and I decide things! Help the homeless!" He then flashed Nixon's "V for Victory" symbol, returned his computer to the desk and sat back down.

"Sir," said Anne coldly, "I hope you realize that this is the beginning of the end of your political—"

"YOU KNOW IT'S HARD OUT HERE FOR A PIMP," blasted the computer speakers. President Carr had turned on iTunes. He rapped along as only a middle-aged caucasian could, hurting Anne's ears like a mass laxative recall hurts toilet paper companies. "WHEN HE TRYNA GET HIS MONEY FOR THE RENT..."

Anne stalked out of the office. Carr turned off iTunes and went back to the internet, where he was watching a cat play the tuba. Man, the things cats could do these days. He pressed a button on the intercom. "Anne, get me a cat."

Anne threw the intercom out the window. It was not a good day.

*Women*, thought President Carr as the door opened to his office. Thinking it was Anne again, he turned iTunes back on.

"Daddy?" said Veronica.

"Hi, sweetheart." He tried to turn off iTunes. The connection was being slow, so he simply threw the computer against the wall. He valued spending uninterrupted time with his daughter. Anne could buy him another computer.

"How are things?" he asked.

"Good. I just played tennis."

"Your mother was good at tennis," said the President thoughtfully.

"You just ruined the entire sport for me. Forever."

"Aw, come on," sighed the President. "You're really gonna give up a sport just because your mother's a heartless little she-beast?"

"Griffin asked me out," she said, abruptly.

President Carr did not enjoy rapid change. He did not enjoy rapid change involving his daughter. He did not enjoy rapid change involving his daughter and guys he did not know. He was feeling more uncomfortable than a millionaire sleeping on low-grade concrete.

"WHAT?" he squawked. Veronica started giggling. The president frowned. There was nothing in those dumb parenting books he'd read that said your children wouldn't take you seriously if you sounded like a chicken.

"You know..." she said. "Griffin. The butler. Like Layland?"

President Carr had long believed that no repercussions would come from failing to memorize the names of his staff. "He the one with the little glasses and the ugly moustache?" God forbid his daughter would go out with a guy with an ugly mustache.

Veronica grimaced. "No. That guy's *old*."

That was true. President Carr kept wracking his brains. Who was this lurking daughter-thief that some moron (undoubtedly Anne, the source of all his problems) had hired? Why on earth did Veronica want to go out with it? (He was not going to dignify whoever this person was by referring to them as if they were human.) He stalled for time. "What movie are you guys planning to see?"

"It's called Last Year," said Veronica. "It's with Tom Hanks."

President Carr scribbled down a note on a post-it: *Ban 'Last Year'. Blame terrorists.*

"What are you writing?" Veronica asked.

"Nothing, honey." Carr sighed. "Are you sure you want to do this? I mean, he's a guy."

"I know that," said Veronica.

"I just...I don't know!" whined the president. "I don't...I don't feel good about this. Do you hafta?"

“What’s wrong?” asked Veronica quickly, shifting to Damage Control mode. Everyone in the White House was prepared to recognize and defuse a nervous breakdown. No one wanted to repeat the incident where he had laid his head in the lap of an Iranian dictator and cried furiously.

President Carr, not sure whether he believed it himself or not, went off in a spiel of clichés to end all spiels of clichés. Something about always wanting to be there for her, being the number one guy in her life, and not wanting some tux-clad kid to steal her away. At the end of his improvised speech, tears were filling his eyes like clowns fill a Volkswagen—and the scary part was, he thought they might be real.

Veronica hadn’t heard a word the President had said. She was thinking about Griffin—his charming, shy little smile, how he sort of slicked his hair back, how he was always there for her, how unbelievably cute he was. Then she realized that Carr had finished talking. Summoning all her resolve, sincerity, and whatever juvenile cuteness puberty hadn’t stole from her, she smiled her sweetest smile, made adorable doe-eyes at her father, and said “Pleeeeeease?”

“Oh friggin’ Christ.” Carr was powerless against the doe-eyes, and he knew it. “Get out of here. Let me think about it.”

Veronica knew that she had already won the battle—or, more accurately, her doe-eyes had. Griffin would stare into them with double the admiration once he knew what they’d done for him. She excitedly shivered as she walked out the door, leaving her father with his head in his hands. Griffin was just so *cute!*

## 21

To Veronica, Griffin was still cute even when he smooched his hair with a helmet, hugged his knees to his chest, and squeezed himself into a lime-green go-kart. It was understandable, therefore, that she kept losing due to lack of concentration every time they raced around the track. Of course, it was always a pleasure to lose to Griffin. Losing to Layland, Elly, and Helen didn't have the same luster, but she'd lose to them any day just to be able to stare at Griffin's helmet-encased face as if it were a goldfish in a bowl, except that (thankfully for Veronica) Griffin's facial features would not float to the top of his helmet, flip belly-up, and die.

If Griffin had been more observant, he would have noticed Veronica staring at him. However, Griffin, being male, assumed nothing was out of the ordinary. Of course he kept handily beating everyone, but that was only natural—he's been learning to drive since the age of six. The pedal extensions for the sleek military car Sir had taught him to drive cost more than was allotted to the Albanian welfare agencies yearly.

Griffin decided that he would be charitable—after all, what are friends for if not for giving you false hope about your inabilities? He eased up on the gas and looked back behind him. Layland had messed with the gearshift and was speeding backwards, Elly had crashed and was chasing after Helen with the axle of her broken car, and Veronica, transfixed on something, had forgotten to steer and was colliding into the guardrails at the sides of the track. Griffin sighed and gunned it towards the finish line.

Layland and Veronica gave appreciative cheers as they watched Griffin pass the man waving a checkered flag. Seconds later, Veronica and Layland made their ways across the finish line. Elly was still pursuing Helen, axle in her hand and vengeance on her mind.

"Awesome skills!" crowed Layland, putting out his fist for a fist-bump. Griffin looked at it for a second, then stretched out his hand and shook Layland's fist. Some American customs were very strange.

"That was amazing," cooed Veronica, as sweet as a Disney Princess covered from head to toe in honey and powdered sugar.

"Nice job, son," said the man who was waving the flag. He was grinning.

Griffin hadn't seen the man there when they'd started the race, but thought nothing of it. In fact, he was about to thank him when he noticed Veronica giving the

man the sort of stare that someone would give a person that had set fire to their dog. Griffin kept his mouth shut.

The man looked at Veronica and smiled. "Veronica!" he said, and held out his arms. Griffin knew what that meant. He began to dislike this flag-waving, girlfriend-hugging stranger. To his relief, however, Veronica stayed where she was.

The strange man kept his arms up. He had the persistence of a credit card bill that every month comes back, begging to be paid, or it will double and double and double until some large men from New Jersey pay you a visit with a pair of pruning shears. "Aren't you gonna give me a hug, sweetheart?"

"Oh," said Veronica coldly. "I thought you were showing my friends the size of your ego."

"Well," chuckled the man, "I wasn't." He nodded at Griffin and Layland. "Hello, friends. I'm Senator Busman. Johnny Busman. Veronica's stepfather."

He looked like any other person that walked into Carr's office, Griffin thought. They all were clean-shaven, with slick hair, big smiles, suits, and a small pin in the shape of the American flag on their lapels. But this one, thought Griffin, was like a cheap spray-tan—it looked good for about two seconds, but then you could see that it was completely fake and horrible and you wanted to shave it off with a chainsaw.

Veronica was having thoughts regarding chainsaws as well. If Senator Busman said one more thing to her, she would—

"So," said Busman, saying one more thing to Veronica.

"Yes?" She said, curtly.

"Your mother..." Veronica rolled her eyes. Busman raised an admonishing eyebrow. Veronica rolled her eyes again. "...she thinks we should spend more time together," he continued. "You know, get to know each other better. We may not have had the best start, and I understand that, but I think you're a great kid and we'd get along really well. She said—"

"It would be nice if you *pretended* that you wrote this crappy speech yourself, instead of making it obvious that Mom told you what to say," growled Veronica defensively, like a child guarding her Halloween candy. "I thought you enjoyed taking credit for things you didn't do."

Busman let that one go. He had promised Elizabeth that he would stay cool in the face of teenage sarcasm. "Cool as a cucumber," he had said. He felt like a diced cucumber at this point. It was time to play his trump card. He reached into his jacket pocket.

"What are you doing?" asked Veronica. This was a trick question; the only acceptable answer that Senator Busman could give was 'leaving'.

"Here," said Senator Busman, drawing two rectangular pieces of paper from his jacket pocket, "I have two tickets to Cirque de Soleil. They have a show in DC next weekend. You spend so much time with your dad—how 'bout doing something with the other guy that's there for you?" He grinned.

Veronica nodded. "Yeah," she said, smiling sweetly, "That's a good idea." She snatched the tickets out of Busman's hand. "Griffin! Senator Busman got us some tickets to go see Cirque De Soleil!"

Griffin, through the French he had learned at the academy, deduced that to mean 'Circus of the sun'. Maybe that was a NASA program, he thought. It was said to be impossible to get a rocket onto the surface of the sun, let alone an entire circus, but if someone could do it, it would be America.

Senator Busman looked crestfallen. "I was talking about me."

"Oh," said Veronica, feigning surprise. "I thought you said the guy who was there for me, not the guy who was forced by my mom to make a poser attempt at trying to bond with me."

"Look, I just—"

"Don't even," said Veronica. "You're such a tool it's unbelievable."

Throughout Busman's career, insults had been heaped on him like drunken protesters are heaped into a police van. But he had never been compared to a slide-rule before. He supposed it wasn't as bad of a criticism than 'un-American'. He decided to change the subject. "So that guy over there, Griffin."

"What about him?"

"You and him are, uh, going steady, then?"

Veronica rolled her eyes. "Yes, we're going steady. We hang out at the malt shop, and then go and play some records. Then we do the twist and go to the drive-in

movie theatre and talk about what we think of President Nixon." She paused contemptuously. "We're going *out*."

Busman wondered what the difference was. "I see." Summoning up what little real affection for this sharp-mouthed harpy of a stepkid and replacing what was left with feigned parental protectiveness, he called to Griffin. "Hey, son! C'mere a second. I want to talk to you."

"Sorry," said Veronica mock-sweetly, grabbing Griffin's shoulders and steering him back towards the go-kart track, "He can't right now. He has to go beat everyone in go-kart racing again," Then, partly to spite Senator Busman, and partly because Griffin just looked so *cute* with his confused little *what the hell is going on* expression, she gave Griffin a quick squeeze.

Senator Busman was outraged. He didn't come from a party where people sat back and did nothing--at least, they did more than the other guys. Everywhere, news pundits felt their spider-sense tingling as Senator Busman began to stalk off towards President Carr's office. He wasn't going to let this one go.

President Carr had been comparing himself to Forrest Gump a lot lately. There were a lot of similarities, he noticed. First of all, they were both very good at bouncing ping-pong balls off of walls, which President Carr was doing now. Gump was able to do it better than he, but President Carr was sure he would get better with practice. He *thwacked* the ball against the wall. It returned, and he swung at it and miraculously connected.

Then the door was flung open by none other than Johnny Busman, standing in the doorway with the confident and confrontational aura of a mob hitman, but instead of a gun, he was armed with a flag pin and political threats.

President Carr knew that he was better armed than Busman—maybe he didn't have a flag pin or political threats to wield, but he was holding onto a ping-pong paddle—a far superior weapon. Still, he cowered in Busman's shadow like dumb sitcoms cower in the shadow of imminent cancellation.

"What the hell d'ya want, Johnny?" he squeaked.

"I didn't mean to interrupt your little *game*," began Busman snidely.

"I bet you did," muttered Carr.

Busman decided he would be gentlemanly enough to concede that point.

"So, I came here to check up on Veronica—" he began.

"Oh, I see." It was President Carr's turn to be snide. "And were you a big boy driving up here all by yourself, or was Elizabeth in the back with a gun forcing you to come?"

"You could be a little more understanding towards her," said Busman, avoiding the question. "After all, you married her, didn't you?"

"Could she *ever* play tennis," said Carr, reminiscing wistfully.

"So," said Busman, "I saw Veronica down at the go-kart track—"

"The GO-KART TRACK?" mocked Carr. "Oh, no. That's real cause for alarm. She was probably doing horrible things back there, like—" here he paused and lowered his voice for dramatic effect, thoroughly frustrating Senator Busman, "—listening to *rock music*."

"And she was with a boy—" continued Busman.

"Oh, yeah, him. The Griffin kid. The one she wants to go out with. Yep, that's the one," said Carr, his "I-know-something-you-don't" voice grating on Busman's nerves like a fat, ugly, and utterly incompetent cheese grater.

"Well, are you gonna just...let this happen?" Busman was torn between the urge to whine and the urge to violently lash out.

"Oh, I don't know. Let what happen?" President Carr loved this little game. It was like when the ambassador from Cameroon visited. He had put a \$20 bill on the path and attached a string to it, pulling it into a bush when the ambassador tried to pick it up. Anne had been displeased.

Busman was on the verge of running around the room and snorting like a crazed rhinoceros. "Let her...you know. Go steady with this kid!"

"The kids these days call it 'going out', Johnny," said Carr smugly.

"She's thirteen!"

"Almost fourteen," reminded Carr, his eyes narrowing.

"And you think it's OK to just let her—"

"Yes," deadpanned Carr.

"Why?" Busman was desperate now. He was imagining the wrath of Elizabeth, his beloved, Veronica's mother, and occasional sociopath. He knew he would have to hide the kitchen knives or he would end up like Julius Caesar, minus the glorious Roman empire.

Carr leaned back in his chair and smiled sweetly, like a six-year-old child who is five seconds away from kicking you violently in the shin. "Because I trust her. And to spite you. In that order."

Busman knew the situation was hopeless. He threw his final, desperate card on the table. "Elizabeth's not going to be pleased," he said.

"Whatever," shrugged Carr. "I'm not married to her—I don't answer to her anymore. Your problem now."

"David, I want you to reconsider—" gasped Busman with the look of a man who didn't know when to quit, but did know that his prone-to-violent-urges wife would be waiting for him with his custom-made golf clubs as soon as he set foot inside his house.

"Let me ask you something," the President said, smiling his vilest smile and drumming his fingers together, like rain drums on the road around a sleeping hobo,

"Which headline do you like best? 'Jerk Senator voluntarily leaves President's office' or 'Jerk Senator carried out kicking and screaming'?"

"I'm gonna follow up on this," promised Busman, straightening his flag pin. "You're an unfit father, you know that?"

"You're an unfit senator," retorted the President, pointing to the door before Busman could come up with a comeback.

Busman walked out like a lamb, but he knew he would come back in like a lion. Elizabeth wouldn't let this go. She'd sue for full custody. She'd kidnap Veronica if she had to. Elizabeth was as predictable as a Wal-Mart greeter and about three thousand times less cheerful, and he knew that she would fight this one to the death.

President Carr knew this too, but he wasn't worried. He had special presidential powers, which as far as he knew consisted of being able to throw awesome parties and a special red telephone that Anne had put away on a shelf until he proved he could be mature enough to use it.

He called a meeting of his top officials and finest strategists to announce the date and discuss what was to be done. Vice President Phillips, realizing that he could probably sit this one out without too much public backlash, sat in the corner and played Tetris on his phone. Everyone else jumped right to work.

Anne called the cinema and reserved an entire theatre, so that Griffin and Veronica could watch the movie undisturbed (and be easily observed...but there was no need to tell them that). "Just like Elvis," said Carr appreciatively, which, for Carr was high praise.

Demps, through questionable measures involving, among other things, a tank, had obtained the floor plans for the movie theatre. He was working out a surveillance plan with a couple of his best strategists. He himself would accompany the young couple and make sure that nothing happened aside from innocent movie watching and chaste chatter during the previews and Nicolas Cage's cameo.

Kritz worked so hard that the veins were starting to bulge out of his forehead like Godzilla bulges out of a suitcase. He feverishly drafted thirty press-releases, thrown away twenty-nine, and accidentally tore the thirtieth. By the time he finally handed Anne something, his nerves were so racked from writing nonstop press releases that he had hallucinated a story involving Griffin and Veronica having an alien baby and shoplifting

the entire country of Morocco from K-Mart. Anne sighed and re-wrote it into a simple press release about the First Daughter having her First Boyfriend and going on her First Date. Anne wondered how far it would be from this to pole-dancing at the Teen Choice Awards.

Anne was also careful to keep Griffin away from Veronica over the next few days—God only knew how they would look should they find some excuse to split, given the fact that the press release had promised the American people a date. Conspiracy-mongers would concoct some conspiracy, and the whole deal would elicit distrust from the American public faster than a National Geographic documentary featuring a spitting camel elicits 'Ewwws' from third-grade girls. Anne temporarily sent two workers on vacation and loaded their jobs upon Griffin, and, just for good measure, shipped Veronica off to represent the President at a routine summit in Lithuania, because the Vice President was going to South Africa, the Secretary of State would be in the Middle East, and President Carr had had too many beers last time he was in Lithuania and would not be allowed back again after urinating into the Parliament building's historic inkwells.

Griffin pined for Veronica as he Lemon Pledged the other Lemon Pledge can (How menial can you get? He wondered), and she for him as she listened to Lithuanian politicians tell her, in broken English, that they "would not liking to eat the cheese of America." But Anne had no way of knowing, of course, that Griffin was using the cell phone the man had given him to call Veronica whenever he could.

Every day after finishing his tasks, Griffin raced to his room like a marathon sprinter races toward the finish line, but instead of the crowd's cheers, all he heard was the sound of the phone flipping open, the keys popping under his fingers, and Veronica's refreshing voice soothing him, entralling him, and making him forget all about Lemon Pledging the Lemon Pledge cans.

"Hey," she gasped. "How are you?"

"I'm great. How are you? You sound like you were running, you all right?"

"I had to squeeze through a bunch of Lithuanian politicians to get to my phone. These guys are FAT."

"Oh, I bet. Wanna send me a picture?" Griffin, who was enthralled with his newly-discovered and new favorite gadget, the cell phone, took pictures at every

opportunity. Never in one place had there been so many pictures of mundane things, including 32 pictures of Griffin's pillow.

"I will, later. How's everything there?"

"Everything's great," he lied. He wanted to add "I miss you." But was it right to do that? What if she didn't miss him? She was probably having an awesome time with all the fat Lithuanian politicians. He didn't need to make her feel guilty, or awkward, or homesick...

"Awesome. Everything's great here too," she lied. Why hadn't he said I miss you? What if he didn't miss her? He was probably having an awesome time back there with Layland. She felt so awkward and homesick.

"So, um, Veronica," ventured Griffin nervously, "I'm...I can't wait for our, uh, date when you get back."

He remembered! He couldn't wait to go! Maybe he did miss her! "Me too, Griffin!" she squealed, excitedly. "Me too me too me too!"

Some Lithuanian politicians at a nearby table, trying to enjoy their steaks in peace, looked reproachfully at her. She gave them her best *shut the hell up, I'm talking to my boyfriend* stare, which they dismissed as classic American imperialism.

"So, uh, yeah, it's gonna be awesome!" Griffin continued, wanting to continue this conversation that made Veronica so happy but realizing he had nowhere to go, like a hiker that wants to get to the summit of a mountain but realizes that the pass is blocked by an angry mountain goat. "Um...do you like popcorn? I bet they have, you know...popcorn...there."

"Yeah, popcorn, I like that," said Veronica, who was quickly growing bored but had no intentions of abandoning the conversation. "What about Milk Duds? Do you like Milk Duds?"

"What are Milk Duds?"

"They're, like, these things that are caramels coated in chocolate."

"Heh heh. Sweet on the inside *and* the outside," added Griffin, riffing off every candy that described its innards as different from its coating. He wanted to say "Just like you," but couldn't bring himself to do it.

Veronica knew that the conversation was going nowhere. Too much of a good thing that was quickly becoming a bad thing was even less exciting than listening to

strangers jabber in Lithuanian. "Listen, I got to go, OK?" she said. "Important, um, Lithuanian stuff."

"I understand," said Griffin. He did understand, but that didn't mean he didn't want to curl up into the fetal position and cry like a baby.

"OK. Thanks for talking to me. Kisses," she said quickly, and hung up. *Oh my God*, she thought, hyperventilating to the great amusement of the Lithuanians at the neighboring tables. *Why did I say kisses? Should I have said kisses?*

Meanwhile, thousands of miles away, Griffin was jumping around the room. *SHE SAID 'KISSES'!* he screamed internally. WE'RE GONNA GET MARRIED!!!!

## 23

Majesty Theaters—A Kingly Moviegoing Experience—did not shine like a jewel in a royal crown. It shined more like an adequately polished bathroom floor. However, it was relatively easy for the Secret Service to secure and navigate, which was why it was chosen for the most wildly hyped event ever to occur in a run-of-the-mill cinema chain.

Paparazzi had brought sleeping bags to the premises the night earlier in order to get the best spots from which to snap photos of the couple. The secret service brought attack dogs at 6:30 the day of the date to take said spots so that the First Teenage Couple would have a clear area to walk through, as well as a degree of privacy normally reserved for bathroom patrons and J.D. Salinger. Cameras were banned within a four-mile radius of the theatre; anyone with a camera would be sent to Guantanamo Bay.

Moviegoers that day felt a change in the atmosphere of the theatre. The employees were more alert and helpful, but they kept making furtive backward glances over their shoulders, as if they were trying to execute a drug deal or inconspicuously buy a Britney Spears album without being caught. Then there were the suited men—some were inconspicuously hanging around the edges pretending to talk on their cell phones, and some were less conspicuously hiding in popcorn machines and pretending to be potted plants. Of course, most moviegoers were too entranced by the Hollywood hunks smiling down on them from the COMING ATTRACTIONS posters to notice that they were being watched by creepy men (which even the casual moviegoer would recognize as a sign to flee the scene immediately).

The movie theatre was thrice swept for bombs, wet floors, and 10-year-olds with autograph books. The Secret Service had found nothing, but as far as Demps was concerned, sweeping for bombs was like a game of Where's Waldo—no one should ever give up, because something was there, somewhere.

Eventually, some of the smarter secret service agents, who were tired of Demps' neuroticism, fashioned a fake bomb out of McDonald's cartons and pretended to have found it, at which point Demps was satisfied and called off the search. This relieved both the agents and the Majestic Theatre patrons—after all, it *was* rather hard to enjoy a movie with strange men looking under your seat.

Demps, who was to accompany Griffin and Veronica into the theatre, chose his best handgun and taser for the occasion, knowing that only top-notch equipment would be able to stop a hormonal teenage boy.

Griffin put on his best tuxedo for the occasion, but Layland made him take it off. "Way too fancy, man," he sighed. "Veronica's more laid-back, she's not gonna want to have to dress up like you're goin' to a ball. Here, check this out." He tossed Griffin some jeans and a Nike t-shirt, which Griffin caught with skillful dexterity. "Classy stuff, know what I mean?"

Veronica, meanwhile, was eyeing her impending choice of dresses the way her father eyed an impending speech—with a bit of apprehension and the knowledge that she would somehow mess everything up. She was in crisis mode, consulting with her top two fashion consultants, Helen, who frequently parroted the words of Coco Chanel, and Elly, who one day had woken up, put on the first things she found, and showed up at school only to discover that she was wearing a Snuggie and a lampshade.

"This one, or this one? No, this one's ugly!" said Veronica, not even waiting for a decision before she decisively tossed the dress into the Discarded Dress Pile of Doom, looking at it disdainfully. "I'd look horrible in that. He'd like, run away. I look horrible in everything!" She was nervous. She was a mess. She didn't know what to say. She didn't know if he would hate the movie. Her paranoia was collapsing on her like a poorly made doghouse collapses on its canine inhabitant, leaving her to bark out her lamentations at Elly and Helen, who were oblivious as always.

"You look great, what are you talking about?" said Elly.

"Yeah, you look great," echoed Helen, fiddling with the sequins on an already-rejected bright orange dress.

"Why are you spending so much time thinking about this anyway?" asked Elly, rolling her eyes. "I mean, it's just a stupid guy."

"Yeah," said Helen. "He's probably gonna show up wearing jeans and a t-shirt. And then you're gonna look like you're..."

"Obsessed?" put in Elly.

"Too obsessed, too head-over-heels. Yeah. Don't give him the impression that you're sweating this. You have to make it look like you're totally cool, that this is just

another day for you. Don't show him you're so excited. Here," said Helen, tossing Veronica some jeans and a Nike sweatshirt.

"Are—are you sure?" quavered Veronica, who wanted to look her best for Griffin and certainly didn't want to neglect fashion.

"Yes. Dress," said Helen authoritatively.

Veronica dressed and hurried out to meet Griffin, who was loitering around by the limousines, early as always but less impeccably dressed than normal. *He didn't dress up!* Thought Veronica. *He must think this is stupid.*

*She didn't dress up!* Thought Griffin, crestfallen, as Veronica hurried toward him, the hood on her sweatshirt bouncing up and down like a Superball in a bouncy house. *She must hate me.*

Masking their disappointment, they both ran to meet each other. "This is gonna be awesome," said Griffin, trying to reassure himself more than Veronica.

"Yeah," she said, smoothing out the wrinkles in her jeans. "Thanks for inviting me."

"Uh, yeah. No problem. Um. Let's go?" Griffin said tentatively. He watched her smooth the wrinkles in her jeans nervously. Was that girl code for *I hate you*? It was all so confusing.

He wanted to grab her hand on the way to the limousine, but she was resting it against her leg. He didn't want to disturb its peaceful moment with the thigh.

She wanted him to grab her hand on the way to a limousine. She wanted him to guide it gently away from her thigh like a really cute amusement park guard showing people the way to the Tunnel of Love. But he didn't. What had she done wrong? It was probably the wrinkles in her jeans. She smoothed them out so more.

*What did it all mean?* Thought Griffin as he held the door open, ushering her into the limo. The jean-smoothing, the eye-blinking, the hand-being-seemingly-glued-to-thigh-ing—did this mean he was getting dumped? What had he done wrong? He knew he should have worn the tux.

Veronica slid into the limousine daintily, and Griffin followed her, closing the door behind him. As soon as he sat down, he felt the cold metal of a handgun being pressed against his head.

"Don't move." It was Demps. "I don't enjoy shooting people, but I've done it before and will do it again."

"What's going on?" asked Veronica nervously.

"The President asked me to keep an eye on him," growled Demps. "He doesn't want things to go too far, too fast—or anywhere at all."

Veronica thought she was starting to see what all those people on TV meant when they called her father 'anti-progress'.

Griffin had had guns trained on him before, but back then, his goal was simply to shoot the people who carried them. This was a different type of exercise. He wondered how fast a bullet traveled, and if sharing a less-than-a-second kiss with Veronica was worth getting his head blown off. Looking from the gun to Veronica's full, vivid lips, he decided that he would make his decision no sooner than he had to.

While Griffin was mulling through his dilemma, Demps was going over the ground rules for the date. "You buy the tickets with me, you go into the movie with me. If you want to go to the bathroom, you will be accompanied by two armed agents. You may only buy these approved soda and candy brands." He went on to list a multitude of snacks that had been given the seal of approval by President Carr, who knew that the only thing worse than a teenage guy trying to feel up your little girl was the teenage guy not even meaning it because he was hopped up on caffeine and red dye 5.

Veronica rolled her eyes. "You know, we're not kids anymore," she said.

"Of course you're not," he replied.

"He won't try anything funny," said Veronica.

Demps chuckled. "I was his age once."

The car rolled to a stop in front of Majesty Theatres. Demps kept his gun level with the back of Griffin's head.

"You know, I really can't enjoy my date when you're pointing a gun at my boyfriend's head," snapped Veronica.

"He's officially your boyfriend now? My, my. I'm going to have a harder time than I thought," said Demps, somewhat bemusedly.

Neither Griffin nor Veronica was amused. The agent stationed behind a fake palm tree in front of the theatre radioed a statement saying as much to the agents inside the lobby. "Free Horse and That One (the Secret Service code names that,

respectively, Veronica had given herself during a 'I really really really really love horses' phase and Carr had given Griffin during a 'I really really really really hate my daughter's boyfriend' phase) are entering the theatre. Free Horse looks annoyed."

"PMS or teen angst?" radioed the team leader from inside. He attempted to be discreet, but saying "PMS or teen angst?" into a tiny microphone on your lapel in a crowded place is going to earn you weird looks however you say it.

"Seems like teen angst, but it's hard to tell," remarked the Secret Service Agent. Veronica, realizing that Demps wasn't the only one sent to protect her, glared at the agent with all her might. The agent attempted to move behind his tree, but Veronica's gaze was sharper than the edge of a katana and caught him before he could successfully blend into the fake palm. He had never felt so humiliated, and by a teenage girl too! He thought the Army's cliché military lineups where sergeants yelled at him and his comrades for being "Good-for-nothing-maggots" were about as demeaning as it got. Then again, in the army he didn't know about the First Daughter's powerful stare-down.

If the secret agent behind the fake tree felt humiliated, Griffin felt it even more. Going on your first date with a gun pressed to the back of your head didn't make you feel like more of a man. He didn't plan on trying anything in the first place, but now, with the threat of Demps lodging a bullet into his brain obvious as an elephant sitting on your face, he knew he couldn't even if he wanted to.

Demps had been through worse. He was going to see a free screening of a Tom Hanks movie, make some teenage kids squirm, and get away from the President for a couple of hours. Veronica's stare couldn't bring him down; he had survived through years of President Carr's whining, which was twice as strong.

Two agents disguised as part of the sidewalk appeared as if by magic and flung open the double doors enthusiastically, like a lonely man waiting for his mail-order inflatable sex doll flings open the mailbox after returning from work. They were rookies, Demps knew it instantly. None of the veterans in his crew would waste their time pretending to be concrete.

The theatre was heavily air-conditioned, a strategy employed by the theatre owners so that all freezing patrons would be drawn to the warm buttery glow of the overpriced popcorn machine. Griffin had been looking at cliché dating advice on the White House computers over the past few days and knew that, in this scenario, he was

supposed to provide her with his jacket. However, with Layland's imposed dress code, the only thing he could give her was his Nike shirt. He considered removing it, but wondered if it might be considered a 'sudden movement' that could cause Demps to shoot him in the back of the head.

Veronica was looking at Griffin, attempting to start a conversation, but he was thoroughly examining his shirt and awkwardly fiddling with it, pulling it up and then back down again like a kid who can't decide on an ice cream flavor. *Why won't he LOOK at me?* She wondered. She'd show him. If he wouldn't look at her, she would gaze longingly at Owen Wilson's grinning mug, staring lovably down at them from the movie posters that adorned the freezing theatre.

"Do you want food?" asked Griffin, who instantly regretted his question because he had no money.

"Yes," said Veronica, who instantly regretted her answer because she was flat broke.

Griffin marched over to the concession counter like a death row inmate marching to the electric chair of being humiliated in front of your girlfriend. He kept his eyes downcast, hoping to spot a \$20 bill on the ground.

Demps wondered why Griffin was looking at the ground. He had decided that the kid wasn't evil and planning an elaborate death for the president's daughter, so he obviously wasn't trying to blow up the floor with his mind. He could have been looking for something. Social skills, maybe? Demps decided he needn't worry about it. It was obvious that nothing crucial to national security would be happening on this date, meaning he got to concentrate on the movie and, of course, a box of Milk Duds. He enjoyed Milk Duds immensely.

The pimply teen in the ill-fitting paper hat stared at them suspiciously from behind the stick counter. "Can I help you?" she asked suspiciously.

"Um..." said Griffin, leaning over and peeking behind the counter to see if any \$20 bills were hiding on the floor on the other side, "Can I have, um...actually, I'll have nothing." He couldn't make Veronica pay for his oversized popcorn that he'd only be getting to create a clichéd movie-date atmosphere. After his not-having-a-jacket-to-give-her faux pas, that would be relationship suicide. "Veronica, what do you want?"

"Um, I'm actually not, like, hungry." She couldn't make Griffin pay for her food. She'd feel horrible. She would have to throw it up and sell the vomit on eBay to pay him back, because her father had spent all of what would have been her pocket money buying life-size Wonder Woman sculptures on eBay and had just been informed that he was not allowed to pay for his daughter's allowance out of the transportation budget. According to Anne, monorails were more important to the American public than Veronica's ability to buy Sour Patch Kids.

"Milk Duds." Demps slapped a five-dollar bill on the counter. The bored employee handed him his Milk Duds. Demps snatched them up and clutched them to his chest protectively. "Let's go," he said, herding Veronica and Griffin towards the ticket checkers.

Generally, ticket checkers are not the chocolate chippiest cookies in the Chips Ahoy bag. However, the one taking tickets was smart enough to realize that the strange people in trench coats loitering in the lobby all day had turned their attention to this awkward-looking teen couple and the hulking steroid-infused shadow who was guarding a box of milk duds with his life. "What the hell is UP with you guys?" he asked, in the tone of voice that you use when you've been tearing off ticket stubs for jerks, morons, and whiny kids for 8 hours.

"We are going to see a movie," replied Demps.

"Yeah, well, all the creeps who been hangin' around here are staring at you, and you look like you're going to wring that kid's neck."

"I am an overprotective father, and they are staring at me because I look like a television host," said Demps woodenly. Demps, not being a skilled orator, had practiced this line over and over in the bathroom mirror should the need arise.

The ticket checker rolled his eyes. "Tickets."

They showed him their tickets. He gave an angsty sigh and a customary eye-roll. "Theatre 9. Fifth one on your left."

"Thanks," said Veronica.

Griffin decided that if she was going to be courteous, he ought to be courteous too, or else she would think he was a rude jerk and not up to her standards. Of course, he couldn't copy what she just did, because then he would have no originality. Thinking quickly, he said, "You're welcome."

Veronica and the ticket checker stared at him quizzically. Demps stared at his Milk Duds.

Griffin couldn't even think of an explanation. "So, um. Let's go, like, see the movie and stuff."

They trudged down the hallway. Everything looked sticky from popcorn, candy, and tears cried by sentimental women after watching movies based on Nicholas Sparks novels, and a few cried by hardcore men after watching the latest butchering of their favorite comic book.

"So...nice theatre," said Griffin, desperate to make conversation.

"Yeah," said Veronica. "It's very...it has a lot of posters."

"Yes it does," said Griffin. "Um...what's the movie about?" He knew full well what it was about. He had read the synopsis on Wikipedia thirty times so that he would be able to engage in intelligent discussion about the plot and characters.

"Um...I forget. It's a romantic movie, I think. With Tom Hanks."

"Tom Hanks," said Griffin. He was grabbing at straws now. "That's a funny name. Do you know anyone else with the name Hanks?"

"Yeah," said Veronica. "Colin Hanks."

"Who's that?"

"Tom Hanks' son."

"I see," said Griffin. The conversation fizzled like a wet firecracker. "Um..." said Griffin, trying desperately to light the sodden firecracker so that it shot into the air, shattering into a beautiful image of Griffin and Veronica kissing passionately, "Do you like romantic movies?"

"Yeah, I guess," said Veronica. "They're...like, I don't know. They're really good."

Griffin was glad to know she thought that. He hadn't had much experience as far as American social matters went, but he was sure that the crappier the movie you took your girlfriend to was, the crappier your chances of being kissed would be. He couldn't screw this up—she was everything to him. She was his shining star; she was radiant, even in jeans and a Nike sweatshirt. She deserved more than this crappy theatre and this awkward chatter. He strode on down the theatre hallway determinedly. He would find something to say to her, somehow. He had no doubt. With each step, a suave, witty, romantic, dazzling sentence took shape in his head.

"You passed the theatre," said Demps.

Dazed, Griffin realized that he and Veronica had indeed passed the theatre. "Sorry!" he apologized, turning back.

"It's OK," mumbled Veronica.

"So, um, what's the movie about?" asked Griffin again, hoping she'd forgotten that he'd already used that conversation-starter not three minutes ago.

"Didn't you already ask me that?"

Damn. She hadn't. "Um, I forgot. Never mind."

If awkwardness was a federal crime, Demps reasoned that he would have enough evidence to put Griffin away for life.

Griffin knocked over an oversized cardboard cutout of Tom Hanks in his haste to open the door to the theatre for Veronica. "After you," he said to Veronica, in a voice that sounded more cliché than a Lifetime original drama.

"Thanks." Veronica smiled and went through the door. She didn't know what was going on. Griffin was acting all weird, Demps was chuckling at odd intervals, and nothing felt right.

The theatre was completely empty, and Veronica picked out seats in the middle. Demps tried to edge into their row with them, but Veronica shook her head forcefully at him. "C'mon. Can't we just be alone?"

Demps sighed. "I'll sit behind." He had hoped to sit next to them, or even between them, so as to waylay any hopes of romantic contact, enabling him to focus solely on his Milk Duds and not thwarting Griffin's awkward adolescent advances.

Griffin looked over at Veronica as they edged down the row towards their seats. "So, uh...this is going to be fun," he said. It was almost a question.

"Yeah," said Veronica unenthusiastically, staring at the blatantly easy trivia question about Will Smith on the screen.

"What's the answer?" asked Griffin.

"B, I think," said Veronica. Sure enough, it was.

"You're really smart," said Griffin, who was convinced that the way to a girl's heart was to toss compliments out there and hope that they worked.

"Thanks," she said, smiling. Maybe this wouldn't be so bad. She liked Griffin. The movie would be nice. So what if things had been a little awkward? "Thanks for asking me out," she said sweetly.

Griffin didn't know what he was supposed to say at this juncture, and his normally sound vocabulary had gone on a temporary vacation, enabling him to say only "um uh duh buh...welcome."

Veronica looked at the screen, which was currently displaying an ad for a local restaurant. "Uh...that looks like a good burger," she said.

"Yeah," said Griffin, who decided that he would be relieved once the movie started. They would no longer have to awkwardly talk.

They watched the next few advertisements flick across the screen in silence. Behind them, Demps loudly chewed his Milk Duds.

Finally, like a pair of mail-order cereal box spy glasses that you'd waited five weeks for, the film arrived. Griffin was grateful. The main character strode onscreen and professed his cynical views about love and women. Then, he found out he only had five months to live. And finally, there was an elaborate dream sequence. Demps and Veronica, who recognized all of these as clichés, were bored out of their wits. Griffin, however, had not seen any American films, and decided that this was the pinnacle of entertainment and originality.

Truthfully, Griffin wasn't really concentrating on the film. He was watching Veronica, studying her face as she laughed and laughing along with her—not because he thought the movie was funny, but out of pleasure because she was happy, and he was with her. He knew he needed to, in Layland's words, "make a move" eventually. Layland had suggested a trick where a simple stretch turns into laying your arm across a girl's shoulders, but Griffin wasn't sure if he could pull that off without Demps noticing. Then, he saw her hand, resting next to her on her seat cushion, just inches away from his. Her fingers curled slightly, as if beckoning—*come to me, Griffin. Hold me.*

Griffin's hand inched cautiously towards Veronica's, like a shy Wal-Mart shopper who is unsure whether or not he should ask the scary-looking, tattoo-decorated employee for help finding the deck chairs. He pulled it back—he couldn't do it, could he? No, the risk was too great. What if she pushed it away? What if a knife suddenly dropped down from the armrest and severed his hand? He kept his hand where it was.

But he couldn't keep it there. It had a mind of its own, like a futuristic computer system in a clichéd sci-fi movie. It darted out and grabbed Veronica's. She accepted it happily, interlacing her fingers with his.

Demps may have been primarily interested in his Milk Duds, but this activity did not escape him. Hopped up on sugar, he did the only thing he could think to do to sufficiently carry out the direct orders of the President ("He can't touch her. Or even breathe on her"). He drew his gun and fired, shattering the armrest between Griffin and Veronica. They both pulled their hands back.

Pandemonium ensued. Several security guards secured the exits. Hidden snipers popped up from throughout the theatre. Twenty heavily armed SWAT teamers poured in and aimed their guns at Griffin and Veronica.

"HANDS ON YOUR HEAD!" screamed a sniper. "NOW NOW NOW!"

Griffin and Veronica obediently put their hands on their heads.

"What's going on, chief?" one of the secret service agents asked Demps.

"Code purple. Suspect tried to initiate physical contact, intimacy level 1."

*Christ, thought the agent. Did I really join the secret service to stop two kids from holding hands?*

"Sorry about that," said the secret service agent who let Griffin out of the trunk when the SUV stopped in front of the White House. "We had to knock you around a bit. Part of our job."

Another agent undid the handcuffs, and Griffin thanked him. Griffin wondered why these people were being so nice to him—after all, his job had been to kill the man they were supposed to protect. He tried to remind himself that it still *was* his job. But he didn't want that job anymore. He wondered if he was going through what Americans called a 'mid-life crisis'.

Veronica's limousine pulled up right alongside their car. Veronica jumped out nanoseconds after it had stopped, slamming the door in Demps' face as she exited like a crabby atheist slams the door on the Jehova's Witnesses. "What are you doing with him?" she screamed at the secret service agents, who backed away quickly, rolling their eyes behind their sunglasses.

"Are you all right?" said Veronica to Griffin, pityingly. "They didn't have to cuff you. I'm so sorry." Griffin decided that he had better not tell her about being forced to ride in the trunk of the car.

"It's OK," shrugged Griffin. "No big deal."

"Are you sure? Nothing's wrong?" asked Veronica.

"Well, I mean..." Griffin stammered, "I mean I feel like I kinda ruined our date."

"Oh, Griffin!" said Veronica. "That's...you could never have ruined it! I mean, I was really happy you asked me, and I think we had a great time before you tried to hold my hand and Demps shot the armrest." She rolled her eyes as she remembered the SWAT team pouring into the theatre. She would have a thing or two to say to all the little girls who thought it was so great to be the First Daughter.

"Really?" said Griffin. "Because, I mean, if it wasn't for me, Demps wouldn't have shot the armrest, and—"

"No, seriously, it's fine," exclaimed Veronica. "Actually, I liked it when you held my hand." Griffin smiled. "It felt good," she rushed on. "Thanks."

Then inexplicably, in a move more passionate than the love of a nerd for his first-edition Batman comic book, more inexplicable than the plots of most soap operas,

and more reflexive than flinching at a flying fist, her head darted forward and her lips met briefly with Griffin's cheek.

Griffin felt like he might collapse from weak-kneed excitement. Then it felt as if all the strength in the world had been injected into him.

This, explained the White House doctor when he woke up, was called testosterone, and it was why he had bellowed like a bull and head-butted the wall.

President Carr did not want to wake up. He never wanted to wake up, because it meant that he would have to get out of bed. Getting out of bed meant that he would eventually be forced to go to work, and going to work meant that he would inevitably be yelled at. Some days, however, he didn't even need to get out of bed to be yelled at. As he looked cautiously at the ringing phone next to his bed, he could tell today was one of those days. He wondered if he should pick it up. He decided not to. He rolled over and began to close his eyes pleasantly when the phone rang again. President Carr snatched it up, barked "He's dead," and put it down. He hoped they would buy it. You could never tell what kind of crap people will buy, he told himself as he looked wistfully at the Turn-Yourself-Into-A-Bear-O-Matic in the corner of his bedroom that had never worked and had no warranty.

The phone began to ring again, wrenching Carr's attention away from the Turn-Yourself-Into-A-Bear-O-Matic. He picked it up. "What," he mumbled groggily.

"Why the hell aren't you in your office?" seethed Anne. President Carr looked over at the clock. It was eleven-thirty. "Why aren't you *here?*" demanded Anne, who sounded like she was about to explode, like a marshmallow in a microwave.

President Carr didn't know how to acceptably answer her question—but she was the one always telling him to be honest. It was her fault if she didn't want the truth. "I'm hungover," he drawled.

"WHAT?" bellowed Anne.

Maybe I made a mistake, thought Carr. He pulled back the covers and saw a lot of beer cans. He hadn't made a mistake. "Yeah, I'm hungover," he said.

If sighs could kill, Anne would have turned Washington DC into a ghost town. "Just turn on CNN."

"I can't," lied President Carr. He never liked the people pointing at screens and saying "Back to you, Bob." He wished TV would go back to what it was in the good old days—old fashioned slapstick and bears on bikes.

"Turn it ON."

President Carr wasn't really in the mood to argue with Anne, so he turned it on. The bright light seared his eyes, and he shielded his face, cowering under the covers.

This was nice, he thought. Who needed Fort Knox and secret bomb shelters? The safest place in the world was beneath a down comforter.

He could still hear the annoying people talking in the background. He wished they would stop, but the remote—and with it the ‘mute’ button—were on top of the covers. Did he dare risk it? He would, just to make them shut up about whatever hullabaloo on Capitol Hill they had chosen to rant about that day. Squeezing his eyes shut, he bravely emerged from his blanket fort and was met by the eerily sweet voice of the morning news anchor.

“Angry lawmakers united today...” she was saying.

*Well, there’s a first,* thought Carr.

“Against President David Carr.”

*This is not good,* thought Carr. *I need to process this. To process this, I need more beer.* Carr looked around for more beer and saw none. This day was getting progressively worse.

“Tensions between Congress and the White House have been building for months...”

*No one tells me anything,* stewed Carr.

“But the tipping point, apparently, was Carr’s recent refusal to sign onto a bill to provide health care for American children.”

*Oh, God,* thought Carr. *That one? Seriously?* He couldn’t believe it. It was just a bill, after all. He’d make it up to them, though. He’d sign the bill, and sign it again for good measure. Then, to show that he cared, he’d do a photo op with some kids. That’d do it. He’d take them to...the Jack Daniels factory. He’d always wanted to go there.

He picked up his cell phone and began thumbing through the directory. There were plenty of numbers for prostitutes, pizza places, and the pizza place where the delivery women were prostitutes. He could not, however, locate the number for Jack Daniels’ corporate headquarters.

The phone began to buzz in his hand like a square, electronic bee. President Carr flung it to the floor, worried that it would sting him. He flipped it over gingerly with his foot and read the caller ID—it was Anne. He tentatively raised the phone to his ear.

“Hi?”

“Did you watch it?”

"They're mad, huh?" He turned back to the TV. One of the big supporters of the bill, Rep. T. Satek, was making a passionate speech. Even being hungover, Carr could recognize the words 'Carr', 'incompetent', 'travesty', and 'disgrace'. Carr wondered how he could ever recover from this. He wondered if congress would cooperate with him ever again. He wondered how low he was falling in the polls. He wondered what travesty meant.

"This isn't good," seethed Anne.

"What's 'travesty' mean?" asked President Carr.

Anne hung up on him. She had no time to deal with this. The phones were ringing off the hook, the news pundits were pounding their fists and shouting, and a crazy person outside was attempting to fire flaming arrows at the White House. Everything had turned bad, like the contents of a refrigerator after its owner returns from a six-month stay in Tajikistan. Why wouldn't he sign the bill? Why hadn't he made more friends in congress? Why wasn't there anyone they could easily pin the blame on?

An intern poked his head in the door. "Excuse me—"

She threw a paperweight at him. She had had to defuse too many scandals in her tenure as advisor/assistant/ass-saver of the president, but this was quite possibly the worst she'd ever encountered. And if being at the top of her game and saving her boss from imminent impeachment meant that a couple of interns got beamed with crystal paperweights, so be it.

She checked her cell phone. Every major news network had called at least twelve times. Newspapers and internet sites were calling as well. While some were demanding, some were more accommodating: The New York Times was actually giving her a choice between "Dumbface Does It Again" or "How the Hell Did Our School System Fail President Carr So Badly?" She knew she would have to start answering messages soon, or the news networks would start throwing notes taped to bricks through her window. As she was about to call back The Today Show, the intercom beeped. Relieved, she dropped the phone on the desk.

"Senator Busman is here to see you," said the voice on the other end nervously.

Anne wished Carr wouldn't avoid Busman so much. Of course the man was a scheming jackal with a smile that was more fake than an extended warranty deal, but it was President Carr's responsibility to maintain relations with other lawmakers. Then

again, Anne reminded herself, President Carr didn't care much about responsibilities—after all, right now he was lying in bed, surrounded by a bunch of beer cans.

"Send him in," Anne sighed. She hid the paperweights under the desk so she wouldn't be tempted.

A few seconds later, Busman entered the room, all smiles. He extended his manicured hand for Anne to shake. She contemplated throwing a stapler at it, but settled for attempting to crush it between her fierce fingers. He grinned and squeezed harder. *Damn him*, Anne thought.

"I'm very busy, Senator Busman," she began.

"I know you are," he said apologetically. Anne was sure he didn't mean it, but there was no way to tell with this man. He could run over God with his car and charm Him with his rhetoric pearly whites—he was that much of a politician. "I was hoping to talk to the President, but he doesn't seem to be in."

*Oh, he's out*, thought Anne. *Out cold. After being out all last night, too.* "That's right, he's not in," she said, hoping the Senator would take the hint and go away.

"You know, he's not making a lot of friends right now," said Senator Busman.

"Really?" Anne faked surprise through gritted teeth.

"People aren't happy. I'm sure he knows that."

"I'm sure he does," growled Anne.

"Then this won't come as a surprise to him," said Senator Busman, handing Anne an envelope.

"Is this anthrax?" Anne asked, regarding it suspiciously. If it was anthrax, she would shove it down his phony throat.

Senator Busman laughed. "Oh, no. Not anthrax. Confidential papers. I think he may be expecting them. Maybe not. Tell him they were from me."

Anne started to open the envelope, but Senator Busman shook his head and wagged a finger at her, grinning. "Mustn't touch. Confidential papers. Legal stuff. For the president."

Anne was considering throwing the papers out the window, confidential or not, but paused. God only knew what they were, but a swift legal kick in the butt from Senator Busman would be sure to snap Carr out of his hangover.

Anne smiled sweetly. "Thank you, Senator," she forced herself to say. "I'll give these to him immediately."

"Thank you," grinned Busman, tipping an imaginary hat.

"Don't mention it," Anne said. As he exited down the hallway, she muttered a few choice words under her breath. Then she started down the hall to President Carr's room.

President Carr, who had since gone back to sleep, did not enjoy being woken up in general, but he least preferred being woken up by other means than someone banging on his door. "Go away," he yawned.

The pounding continued. President Carr flashed his middle finger at the rattling door and shuffled over. "Fine, fine," he mumbled, and opened it.

Anne was expecting a grotesque scene, but she was expecting the president to at least have put clothes on. "Where are your clothes?" she asked, taken aback.

"Where's your brain?" he growled. He was very confrontational in the morning, especially when he was hungover.

Anne decided to ignore his poor comeback. "I have this for you," she said, handing him the envelope.

President Carr saw the confidential label on the envelope and lit up like a streetlight at dusk. *Girlie magazines*, he thought. He grabbed the envelope from Anne and tore it apart. A bunch of papers fell out. He looked at it, but he couldn't understand it. He wondered why everything wasn't illustrated. If the only thing he had to scrutinize was picture books, he bet that the people in Congress wouldn't be nearly as mad at him. "What is all this?" he asked Anne.

"Senator Busman just brought it in," she said. "I don't know what it is."

Carr didn't anticipate these being good papers, given the fact that Senator Busman *sucked*. He tried to read it, but the letters floated around on the page like toddlers learning how to tread water in a beginner's swim class. Stupid hangover.

"Whazzis say?" he asked Anne, pointing to a section that looked to him like FFOIACL GAELL TITOPEN ORF LUFL NETRAALP SOCTDUY FO EOIACVRN RARC. Anne read it to him.

President Carr took a moment to process this. "Crap," he said once he figured out what it meant.

## 26

Griffin had been revived quickly and the dent that he made in the wall had been swiftly fixed. At the White House, everyone was so concerned with President Carr's screwups that other people's accidents were barely paid any attention. Griffin himself was glad that everyone had forgotten that it ever happened. God forbid they wouldn't let Veronica kiss him in order to avoid damage to property. Glorified, polished stone was replaceable. True love was not.

Veronica was perfectly happy to forget about the incident as well. She wanted to kiss Griffin again, and wanted him to kiss her back. She did not want her fantasies of this moment marred by memories of Griffin charging at the wall like an angry bull. She wondered what it would be like to kiss an angry bull. It would probably bite her lips off.

At the moment, Veronica, Layland, and Griffin were running around, trying to shoot each other with paintball guns. Griffin was very adept at hitting Layland, who looked like the canvas of a hyperactive artist, but always purposefully missed Veronica. The good people at XTREMESPLAT had provided the paintball guns free of charge in exchange for President Carr's signing of a bill that gave out a tax credit for any citizen that purchased a paintball gun.

Layland held his guns sideways, doing the best action movie star impression that he could. He shot straight into the ground. He shrugged, deciding to savor the small victories. At least the dirt would never mess with him again.

Veronica, who fired a gun with the expertise of the average cockatoo, had sprayed orange paint on the trees, the bushes, and a tour group from Ohio. So far, nothing she'd shot had even grazed Griffin or Layland, but she still pursued them relentlessly. "Gotcha!" she yelled as she snuck up behind Griffin, who had heard her approaching but decided to stand there dumbly to boost her confidence. She raised the gun, aimed the muzzle at his back, and shot.

"Ow!" Griffin faked excruciating pain. "You got me!" he turned around, smiling. "High five?"

"This is fun!" said Veronica, shooting him in the face.

Layland, who had tired of shooting at Veronica and Griffin, was now targeting the blackbirds that flew across the sky purposefully yet with no clear destination, like a

Greyhound bus whose driver has lost the route map. He fired relentlessly into a large cloud of birds and marveled at his excellent marksmanship as birds tumbled onto the grass, the gardeners, and the angry people protesting outside. There were a lot more angry people protesting outside than usual, he remarked. Like, a lot more. Like, about two hundred thousand more.

"Hey guys!" he called to Griffin and Veronica, who were giggling at each other and firing off shots at trees. "There are, like...a crapload of guys out there."

Veronica turned her head and saw the large, rowdy, sign-wielding, murderous looking, effigy-burning crowd. A woman with a cowboy hat and sunglasses was pumping her fist and bellowing into a megaphone. The crowd roared like a stadium full of hockey fans watching blood spill on the ice. Veronica gulped, and her heart pumped a little faster. She really hoped these people were here about Vice President Phillips.

Griffin heard them before he saw them. The chant of "Die, Carr, die!" became unmistakable. He turned and saw Veronica staring out at the crowd, looking stunned.

Missy Nova was on top of the world. She had started out as just another hippie in the peace corps, but had made her way up the ladder by performing sex acts on the leaders of several prominent non-profit groups. Now she was recognized as the third-most relevant hippie in America (even though the term "relevant hippie" was more or less an oxymoron, she wore it with pride). She closed her eyes. It was time, she told herself, as the crowd swelled like a twisted ankle and chanted "Die, Carr, die!" with the fervor of a middle manager about to lose his personal parking space. That was her cheer. She had made it up all by herself. It was so simple, she thought, and yet so elegant. She took a minute to savor this moment, basking in the radiant glow of true rage against the Man—rage that she had inspired, cultivated, and compacted into a 250,000-man bomb that she was going to detonate on President Carr.

Her finger stabbed determinedly down on the square gray 'talk' button for her megaphone. "I ask you, are we not citizens?"

"We are citizens!" came the shouted reply.

"Do we not deserve quality leadership?"

"We do deserve quality leadership!"

"Does President Carr provide quality leadership?"

"Hell no!"

"And what are we gonna do about that, fellow citizens?" bellowed Missy Nova into the megaphone, with a fury that exceeded her fury when she realized her mother had given her a lizard-skin iPhone case for Christmas.

The fellow citizens didn't know what they were gonna do about that. Most of them were students at Georgetown who had come out to impress the hot blonde activist in their political science class, who was off in Norway blowing up whalers' vessels at the time. "Get mad?" suggested one college student in close proximity to the stage.

"YESSSSS!" exploded Missy Nova. "WE ARE GOING TO GET MADDDDDD!" She let out a blood-curdling scream into the megaphone. The crowd bellowed back, hoping the hot blonde activist would be able to pick out their voices from the crowd all the way over in Norway.

Veronica looked out at the roaring crowd with growing dismay and disbelief. What was going on? She felt like she had so many things to make sense of and so little time to do it. The world was crashing down on her.

"Holy crap," muttered Layland as the protesters began to toss soda cans at the gates of the White House.

While Layland placed bets with himself on which soda cans would hit the ground first, Griffin looked over at Veronica. Her eyes, which were bordering on overflow, looked like an overindulged bathtub. She was gulping and hiccupping, trying to push back a deep sob. Griffin cautiously snaked his arm around her. "What's wrong?"

She was going to burst, and she knew it. Her emotions were like a car spinning on ice, she had no control. She didn't want Griffin to see her break down like that. She shrugged off his arm and stood up. "I...I have to go," she squeaked, and tore off across the lawn.

Layland, who had lost the last five bets he made with himself (Dr. Pepper cans were apparently not elite flying machines) turned back and saw Veronica running of. "Sup with her?" he asked.

"I don't know," said Griffin nervously, all kinds of theories swirling around in his mind. Had he said something wrong? Did she not like him anymore? Was she being abducted and brainwashed by aliens every night? Why was she running away? "What should I do?"

“Get a GPS,” said Layland, squinting off in the direction Veronica had run,  
“Because she is LONG gone.”

The cell phone that The Man had given Griffin had never been intended for any use beyond receiving one call—the call that would inform Griffin where the gun was and that it was time to use it.

The gun had been taped to the underside of a dresser by a covert operative posing as a cleaning woman, and it waited patiently there like a kid on Ritalin playing hide-and-seek. Layland had nearly found it when digging under the dresser for Snickers bars, but thankfully for The Man, he'd missed it by inches.

Griffin, however, had forgotten the original purpose of the cell phone (and, if he had discovered the gun, likely would not have remembered what it was for). It had been filled with cell phone numbers for Veronica and her friends, as well as backgrounds and ringtones that Layland had downloaded for him. The bean counters in the Albanian government wondered why they were required to spend tax dollars on a Megan Fox cell phone background and a Jay-Z ringtone for “defense purposes”, but they didn't want to ask. Marrosur Kopil had scalped the last emissary they had sent to ask him whether or not it was really appropriate to claim Skittles as a defense expense.

Griffin was, in fact, trying to send Veronica a text message on the cell phone when it rang, chattering in Griffin's hand like a set of dentures with hypothermia. Griffin looked up from the text he was sending to Veronica—“Are you all right?”—to check the caller ID. It said “Joe J. Jones.”

Griffin recognized the name that only a non-English speaker who spent his time watching Gossip Girl and plotting to kill the President could have come up with. It was The Man, he knew. He debated letting it go to voicemail—things hadn't gone well at all the last time he and The Man had talked. But he knew he had no choice, like a bribe-taking congressman who has no choice but to resign. He had to face the music—the Jay-Z ringtone, to be more precise. He reluctantly hit ‘accept’ and brought the phone to his ear, squeezing his eyes shut, hoping that it wouldn't be Sir, but a bill collector or a survey taker or an inebriated college student who thought he was calling Jennifer Lopez. “Hello?” he squeaked.

It was Sir. “It's time,” he said. “Are you ready?”

“Y-yes,” lied Griffin.

“The gun is under the dresser.”

Griffin looked over at Layland. He was asleep. Griffin breathed a sign of relief and edged over to the dresser, feeling around under it gingerly with his fingers. They brushed against cold metal. "I have it," he said into the phone.

"Good," said The Man. "You know where to go and what to do?"

"Yes," said Griffin, stripping the duct tape off of the gun.

"Very well, then," said The Man. "Your country is counting on you."

*He meant Albania*, Griffin reminded himself. He didn't think it was good that he still had to remind himself of that. Or that he had subconsciously memorized half of the American constitution.

"Why have you not hung up?" The Man asked.

"I am hanging up now," said Griffin. He hung up and stood there, looking at the gun. He wasn't intimidated by it—after all, it was just metal. He wasn't intimidated by sink faucets, was he? He was intimidated by what he had to do with it. At the academy, he had been taught to kill people in many kinds of different situations—when there were many of them, when there were few of them, when they were pleading, and when they were women and children. But even the military geniuses at the academy didn't have the foresight to teach him how to kill his girlfriend's father.

Griffin wondered what life would be like after he carried out the killing. He'd have to go back to Albania, he knew that much—back to the land of daylong workouts and Army food. He wouldn't be able to see Veronica again, or Layland—not that he thought they'd really want to see him, considering who he'd killed and that he'd been lying to them all this time.

Griffin desperately tried to convince himself that everything he had ever felt about Veronica had been part of his expertly executed masquerade. Flirting with her, asking her out, letting her kiss him, undressing her in his head—all of those were undercover acts. Weren't they?

He didn't know what to think any more. This was what he was supposed to do. He'd been trained his whole life for this moment. Before, he could have carried it out without hesitation. It was still easy, he reminded himself. Point, click, run. Face lifelong personal guilt. Never see your girlfriend again. Leave behind your amazing life for one where your only luxury is stolen Triscuits.

He wondered what Layland would do. He looked over at Layland, who was snoring peacefully in his bed. Layland would have gone back to sleep, thought Griffin. He considered that a wonderful idea.

He decided that he would make his choice on the way there. No matter what he planned to do, it wouldn't be good for Layland to wake up and see him pacing the room with a handgun. Griffin cracked the door open and peered into the hallway. It was as empty as the head of a TV commentator. He slid out noiselessly, leaving the door open a crack.

Hugging the wall, he edged down his hallway until he came to the wall's end. This was the last stop, he knew. Here was The Hallway—at the end of which stood the bedroom of President Carr himself. Griffin peeked into the hallway—it was deserted. President Carr's bedroom door was slightly open, like the mouth of a person who has something to say but has just forgotten it—something that President Carr did often, coincidentally.

Griffin had no choice, and he knew it. He gripped the gun tightly and edged down the hall, listening closely and hopefully for the footsteps of an approaching Secret Service agent so that he could abandon his mission. He didn't hear anyone approaching. Griffin wondered why President Carr would send a hundred Secret Service agents to supervise his date with Veronica, but not assign any to patrol his bedroom hallway. It was those stark absences of foresight and intellect in general that made Carr such an interesting person, thought Griffin. He wondered what the nation's Playboy models would do when he put a bullet in the head of the man who bought them necklaces and wrote them off as "healthcare" on his budget report to congress.

Griffin's feet were like children that did not want to go to the dentist. They moved out of necessity, but his mind was nevertheless clouded with protests. He began having fourteenth thoughts, since he had already gotten his second thoughts (and then some) out of the way back in the room. The fourteenth thoughts, though they tried valiantly, didn't change anything, like a bunch of hippies who, in a cannabis-induced moment of confidence, think they're going to change the world and then forget about it. No amount of thoughts—not even ten millionth thoughts—could change the fact that this was his job and there was no possible way he was getting out of it. He sighed. He wished the Albanian government offered sick days.

Any distracting sound is welcome when you're doing something that you don't particularly want to do. The sound of the ice-cream truck, for instance, or the TV, or a frat party remind us all of immensely preferable things, even when we are going about our necessary toils. Humans are drawn to them like children are forcefully drawn to the bosom of a Jewish grandmother.

Sobbing is normally not put in the same category as ice-cream truck music, but for Griffin, it had the same effect. When he heard the sobs—just after he had braced himself to barge into the President's bedroom and fire at will—he realized that they were Veronica's.

He stopped and listened closely. The sobs were coming from the room right next to him. He kicked himself for not knowing her room was so close. Then he kicked himself for thinking about the proximity of her room to his when she was crying and generally being a damsel in distress. He needed to help her. Job forgotten, he stuffed the gun inside of an antique vase and pressed his ear against the door. No intelligible words could be heard, just some wrenching sobs and pitiful hiccups that pulled apart Griffin's heart like saltwater taffy.

He put his hand on the doorknob, unsure. How could he enter without startling her? He could begin to make an increasing amount of noise, as if he was coming down the hallway, to warn her. Or, he thought, I could just walk in and hope for the best. He decisively turned the doorknob and pushed the door open, peering in, half expecting to see Veronica having her intestines ripped out by vultures.

Veronica's intestines, thankfully for Griffin, were still in place. At least, they hadn't been moved as far as Griffin could see. He wondered if excessive crying shifted your intestines. If it did, he thought, Veronica's intestines would be somewhere in Rhode Island.

She saw Griffin as soon as he came in, but pretended not to notice, instead pressing her face into the pillow and breathing hard. Her tear ducts were on auto-pilot now, and her pillow looked like it had gone for a swim.

Griffin edged closer. "Veronica?" he asked nervously.

Veronica looked up and pretended to be surprised to see him. She had hoped he would come. She wiped her hand on her face in a futile attempt to clear any tears. "Hi, Griffin," she gulped.

"Are...are you all right?" he knew it was a stupid question before he even asked it, but he decided to ask it anyway. Maybe she was all right, he told himself. Maybe she was just joking with him. Maybe she was doing an imitation of a talk-show host talking to a cancer patient. There were all kinds of possibilities, as far as Griffin was concerned, which didn't involve Veronica being sad. Those, in his opinion, were the best kind.

He hovered over her, not knowing what to do. Was he intruding? Should he go away and let her have her alone time, or would that be leaving her in the lurch? Did she need someone to talk to her? "I just...I guess I need to talk to someone about this," she sniffed, answering his question. She pulled herself into a sitting position and patted the space next to on the bed. Griffin marveled at how meticulous and organized and clean she seemed—smoothing out the sheets when she was having an emotional crisis!—until he realized that she was beckoning him to sit down next to her. He did.

"What's going on?" he said. He had ruled out any broken limbs because he saw no casts, and death of a family member because she wasn't wearing black. He decided that there was no impending thermonuclear war, or else more people would have been running through the hallways.

"It's..." she sniffed. "It's about my dad."

Of course, thought Griffin. Layland had shown him a newspaper article that had said President Carr was the third highest instigator of sob-fests across America, second only to death and Oprah.

"You know..." said Veronica, who nearly started to burst into tears, but controlled her emotions—she didn't want Griffin to see her like this, as some stupid crying wreck! Though she wasn't entirely sure what she DID want him to see her as. Maybe as a cross between an underwear model and Eleanor Roosevelt.

"What's happened?" asked Griffin, who wasn't exactly sure what she was talking about. President Carr did dumb things every day, it was hard to pick one out.

"It's...the protesters. Out there."

Griffin remembered the protestors. He could still hear them outside, faintly. Most of them were drunk, so instead of angry chants against Carr, the noise was mostly a mishmash of TV theme songs. He looked back at Veronica, who was on the verge of breaking down in tears again. She must really not like The Fresh Prince Of Bel-Air's theme, he decided.

"I mean," she continued, "I guess before I was able to, like, shut out the fact that people hate him by not listening to the radio or watching the news or reading the newspaper or going on the internet or anything like that. But now, it's like, they're right here. I have to keep hearing it."

Griffin wondered how he could reply to that one. He could offer her earplugs. He could offer his condolences, but what could he say? "Sorry that your father has alienated the American public to the point where they want him dead." That wasn't going to make her feel better, he knew that much. He uncertainly curled his arm around her shoulders. It seemed to appropriately convey the message he wanted to send but couldn't articulate. She tipped her head over so that it rested on his shoulder and continued to sniffle. He was fine with that. The feeling of her head on his shoulder gave him a feeling with which there were no words to describe, except 'awesome'. He didn't exactly understand what he was feeling, but at least he finally understood what Taylor Swift sang about. As far as he was concerned, Veronica could keep resting her head on his shoulder forever, or at least until he got really hungry.

"It's...I mean, why does everyone think he's stupid? Do you think he's stupid?" Veronica choked the words out like a person upon whom the Heimlich maneuver is being performed.

Griffin thought that it would be useful to have a list of situations in which lying was OK, or, in fact, a good idea—but he felt pretty confident, even without a list, that this was one of those situations. "No, actually, he's, um, pretty smart," said Griffin. "Like the time he....did that thing. That was smart."

This satisfied Veronica. "Really?" she said, digging her head deeper into his shoulder. "That's so sweet." She sighed. "But the problem is, most people aren't as smart as you."

Griffin swelled with pride like a toddler being congratulated on making a poop. "Well, you know. Some people just don't get it," he said pompously.

"I mean...I just don't know! Everyone thinks he's so stupid, and he's ruining America, and that he should die, but, like...they don't know him, right?"

"They don't," affirmed Griffin.

"I mean, I know him! I live with him! For, like fourteen years, almost! So who are these people, you know, saying he's...he's..." her voice caught, as if she were about

to sob again. Griffin, taking into consideration that shirts were best worn not drenched, thought about moving her head off of his shoulder. In the end, he left it there. How could he take it off?

"I know," he said sympathetically, hoping it would somehow stop the flow of Veronica's tears. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to know, but it killed him to see Veronica like this.

"You know, I wish they could just...I mean, when he's not, like, cutting budgets and stuff, he's...a great guy! And, like, a totally nice person!" her voice was shriller now; she was very ready to unleash some total teen angst breakdown on those sign-wielding activists outside.

"He is," said Griffin. "He's very nice."

"And seriously, all those things they're saying about him aren't true! Like that he wants America to fail, or that he doesn't care what anyone thinks, or that he's an unfit parent—"

"An unfit parent?" Griffin was pretty sure that the angry, nearly rioting people outside hadn't come to the White House to give Carr a parenting seminar.

"It's Senator Busman. That jerk! Jerk, jerk, jerk, jerk, jerk." Veronica repeated the word with a stunning degree of ferocity as she dug her fingers into the bedspread beside her, as if she were trying to extract blood.

"Why?" Griffin didn't want to admit it, but possessing a million-dollar smile and a flag pin makes it seem somewhat hard for people to believe that you're a jerk. "What's he done now?"

"Him and my mother are suing Dad for custody." Veronica had barely gotten the words out when a new wave of gulping sobs arose from her throat like vampires rose from their coffins before they got a sparkly makeover and started showing up in high school.

"What?" Griffin tried to picture Veronica with a pasted-on grin and a flag-pin. It looked like something he never wanted to imagine again. "That's horrible!"

"It's just wrong!" sobbed Veronica.

"You're damn right it is!" Griffin was getting angrier now. He was remembering Busman and trying to pinpoint the man's pressure points. Then he imagined the pressure points all grinning and wearing flag pins.

"I couldn't just go live with them! I mean, I'd miss Daddy, and I'd miss the stables and everything, and, like, I'd miss you!" Veronica said, sniffing and brushing the tears off of her face.

Griffin made a blind grab for her hand. He found it quickly, slipping his fingers into hers like Superman slips into his costume. "I'd miss you too."

Veronica tilted her head up to look at him. "I'm sorry you had to hear me crying about all of this," she said, sniffing. "I mean, you didn't have to listen."

"It's OK," said Griffin. "You know, if it helped you feel better."

"It did," she said, a smile breaking out on her tear-stained face like a young star breaking out on a crappy reality show. "Thanks." She cautiously inched her head closer to his. "You're so sweet."

Veronica's lips were in reach of his, right below his chin, tempting him like a 40%-off sale tempts window shoppers. He knew that she wanted him to tilt his face downward and press his lips onto hers. He knew that he should. Her lips, moist and inviting, were beckoning him. But what if they weren't? he asked himself. What if the fact that she's practically shoving her lips in your face doesn't mean she wants you to kiss her? He didn't want to make her feel uncomfortable. How do I know she wants me to kiss her? He wondered, as Veronica scooted her head even closer to his. He looked down at Veronica, to check and see if she was mouthing the words "If you kiss me, I will kill you and make your flesh into waffles." That would surely have made his decision easier for him.

Veronica saw his head tilt down towards hers. Her instincts took over, and she pressed her lips against his furiously, as if she was trying to force them down his throat.

Griffin kissed her back, treasuring the connection between his lips and hers, the union they shared by—Veronica pulled back. Griffin was somewhat disappointed that the greatest experience of his life had lasted about a second and a half. Then again, who was he to complain? He reminded himself that he very well could be running from the law right now. Instead, he was in his girlfriend's room. Kissing her. He then began to think about other things that could be done in girlfriends' rooms that Layland had told him of.

"Whatcha thinking about?" Veronica asked.

"Nothing!" said Griffin, very quickly. "What were we talking about?"

"The custody suit," said Veronica, her voice quivering. She had stopped crying when she and Griffin had kissed, but she was in danger of starting again.

At this rate, Griffin thought, he was going to have to build an ark. "Well, it's not like he's gonna win it, right?" he said, trying to cheer Veronica up. "I mean, your dad *is* the President."

Veronica's eyes filled with water. "The President, yeah. And he just introduced a 30% pay cut for federal judges."

Griffin didn't know what he was supposed to say to that, exactly. "It'll get better," he said confidently.

"Really?" Veronica sniffed.

"Yeah," Griffin smiled, his mind filling with an ingenuous plan like an unchecked spam folder fills with emails. "Everything'll be all right."

Griffin wondered why America's military was seen as so eminent. Not two hours before, he had crept down the hallway to the President's bedroom with a gun in his hand. Now, he had just walked into the Capitol, past the security guards playing poker by the x-ray machine, and towards the office of Senate Majority Leader Johnny Busman.

All the guards saw was a staffer who was a little on the short side, striding a little too quickly, and coming to work a little too early in the morning, as in 2:30 am. To them, nothing was out of place but the ties that they never bothered to put on correctly.

Griffin was very conscious of the way his shoes clopped against the floor, resonating through the empty halls like a stand-up comic's racist joke resonates above the heads of a stunned audience. The statues that lined the halls paid him no mind and went about their business of being dead. He, meanwhile, skirted around another security guard who was too busy studying the pattern of the floor tiles to notice the boy who was possibly the nation's greatest security threat.

Johnny Busman's office was, like integrity, impossible to find in the capitol. One of Carr's first acts was to move the offices of the House and Senate leaders into the darkest corners of the Capitol to show them who was boss. The House and Senate leaders had quickly retaliated by cosponsoring a bill that proposed a presidential pay cut. Still, with the help of a map and the unmistakable scent of lobbyists to guide him, he was able to make his way towards Busman's office.

A guard loitered inside of Busman's office, counting the number of dead people on the ceiling and admiring the curling ends of their wigs. The guard was contemplating a simpler age. An age where politicians worked for the good of their fledgling country. An age where everyone was grateful for their newfound independence instead of taking it for granted. An age where everyone was at peace with one another. His thoughts were interrupted by Griffin delivering a karate chop to the back of his neck, knocking him out cold.

Griffin watched the officer fall, facedown, to the floor, and made a quick search of his belt and pockets, looking for useful things like access codes, tasers, and spearmint gum. Then he surveyed the hall, looking for the guards that seemed to pop up everywhere like those grotesque creatures in that Whac-A-Mole game Layland had downloaded on his phone. Seeing none, he reached forward and grasped the knob of

Senator Busman's door. He let his grasp linger on the cold metal for a minute until he felt completely focused. Then he eased the door open.

"Welcome!" proclaimed a sign sitting on the looming oak desk that greeted Griffin as soon as he entered the room. "This is a friendly place," a bowl of mints on the desk implied. If they could talk, they would have greeted Griffin with a friendly smile and a "How are you today, sir?". Griffin would have greeted them back with a sleeper hold.

The office was eerily deserted as he made his way through the sea of varnished wood and desktop computers. Busman's office, he assumed, was through the door to the side, the door around which several desks were within shouting distance (or stapler-throwing distance, depending on the senator's mood). Griffin edged cautiously towards the office, pressing cautiously against a desk. Even though he was sure there was no one around, he couldn't risk being seen. Taking one last furtive look around, he dived at the door, spun the doorknob, and exploded through the door, catching himself on the expensive leather upholstery of a couch.

Senator Johnny Busman lay sleeping at his desk. Even his snores sounded superficial. He had dozed off on his keyboard, and was accidentally sending his entire staff an email that said: "afahoiæu9032htfgiqoef2jsg3uygqihfgsiouhzojkdfjhsjjjjjjjjj".

Griffin crept over to Busman's desk. The senator's expensive blazer rose and fell as he breathed, but he gave Griffin no sign that he was waking up. Griffin began sifting through the papers on Busman's desk—mostly threatening letters from and to other congressmen, as well as the occasional ego-boosting article titled something like "Busman's Influence Stronger Than Ever", with a glossy picture of Busman grinning like a hyena on LSD. No official legal papers. Griffin needed to find some official legal papers—specifically, the evil ones who were proposing that Busman and Veronica's mother could whisk her away to Georgetown. Griffin wasn't exactly clear where Georgetown was, but he knew damn well that he didn't live there, and that was bad. Busman had to be stopped by any means possible, and Griffin had been lucky enough to have 13 years of training in those means.

He slowly opened a drawer in Busman's desk. It slid noiselessly on its hinges. Griffin checked the contents—a bunch of pens. Griffin slammed the drawer shut. He

didn't have time to deal with pens. After checking on Busman, who was peacefully dreaming of climbing the political ladder and Pop-Tarts, Griffin went back to work.

He opened drawer after drawer after drawer—stacks of rubber bands, early campaign memorabilia, magazines full of women in poses that Griffin thought were reserved for professional contortionists and gymnastics competitors, and old rolls of Life Savers that had been forgotten about and discarded. No legal papers were tucked away in the slew of congratulatory letters and extra staples. Griffin checked behind the computer. Nothing but some discarded rubber bands. He considered taking the computer apart to see if the papers were hidden in there, but he reminded himself that Busman wasn't that smart. He shook his head and turned around to survey the rest of the office. Staring him right in the face was a safe.

Griffin's resourcefulness wasn't going to fail him now. The task seemed near impossible, but he had too much to lose to back off now. If he lost Veronica, then what? He'd have to go back to the life he once tolerated and now saw no point in. Of course, there was still Layland, but there were only so many off-color jokes that one could listen to.

Griffin began to fashion an impromptu blowtorch out of paper clips, a cigarette lighter, and a glue gun. Busman, as dreams of being Time's Senator of the Year danced in his head, was blissfully unaware of what was transpiring.

Griffin grabbed Busman's most important-looking documents to fuel the fire for the blowtorch. He whisked Busman's mouthwash out of the bathroom, using it as a chemical agent that would hopefully keep the fire going, or at least make it smell minty fresh. Concentrating, he squeezed the trigger of the glue gun. A blue flame shot from the tips of the paper clips he'd untwisted.

"Nmmh gmh mblm blh," Busman mumbled sleepily, failing to notice that grand larceny and willful destruction of property were taking place in his office.

Griffin guided the blowtorch quickly and efficiently, cutting a hole in the safe. When it was done, he turned the blowtorch off, set it down carefully next to a crystal paperweight, and reached inside, unlocking it with a click. He swung the door open. The only contents of the barren interior were a set of legal papers—just what Griffin had been looking for. He took the blowtorch, lit them on fire, and then closed the safe. On his way out, he set fire to Busman's couch for good measure. If someone was going to

mess with his Veronica, he was damn well going to mess with their furniture, Senator or not. He ran out of the building, hoping that he was quicker to the exit than the fumes from the burning couch were to the smoke detector. If not, well...he'd figure that out then. The important thing, in his mind, was that Veronica would always be with him and Layland, racing go-karts, playing paintball and Homicidal Slayer Slaughter Massacre Kill Death III, and just sitting around talking. And kissing. Griffin would have set fire to a million couches to keep that intact.

President Carr enjoyed celebrating, primarily because celebrations normally involved some sort of alcohol. Anne had had to go to great lengths to call the restaurant and get them to replace their fine wine with pear juice. Had the citizens of America known that their president was paying twenty-seven dollars a glass for pear concentrate, they would have been even more wary of their leadership, but they were, thankfully, in the dark.

The cause of this celebration, which cost a sizable portion of money that the president was sure would eventually come from somewhere, was the mysterious case of the custody suit being dropped on account of disappearing papers. Carr knew well that Busman could always file another suit, but he doubted it—this time, Carr would have time to move that the judge throw it out on the grounds that if the judge did, he would receive the next Supreme Court nomination.

President Carr tossed back glass after glass of pear juice and watched the various White House staffers eat and laugh. This, he decided, was what being a leader meant—watching everyone party and taking credit for it. After all, he'd suggested this party, hadn't he? He'd ordered that sign company to make a banner, featuring Busman's charred couch. He was responsible for a positive change in morale. He was very proud of himself. It was a good party that only called for one thing: being even better. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his Blackberry, scrolling through his contacts until he found the one that said 'strippers'. He pushed the 'call' button. This was going to get funky.

Griffin, Layland, and Veronica had been shoved into a corner by whichever intern had put together the seating chart. Griffin wanted to make conversation, but ever since Veronica had kissed him, it seemed impossible. He could only explain that he couldn't explain, but things had changed. Not in a bad way, of course—he had savored the moment and wanted badly to repeat it—but in such a way that whenever he tried to make conversation, nothing came to his mind but Veronica's lips. He wasn't sure that it was proper American custom to start a conversation with "I really love your lips," so he kept his mouth shut.

Layland wanted to break the silence, but he was going through a mid-teens crisis. His best friend had an attractive girlfriend, whereas the best he had was an

attractive female Sim that he would send to the shower every ten seconds just to see her briefly in her underwear. Layland was even unable to come up with any off-color jokes—they had congregated and hidden in the back of his mind like an ethnic group being prosecuted by a racist autocrat. He was wondering what, with no girlfriend or ability to spew perverted punchlines, he would do with his life. He considered writing a chronicle of being whisked by Carr himself from an adoption agency and being forced to work in the White House as part of Carr's Hired Help For Less program, but then again, those books only seemed to work when they were written by one-legged African kids, and Layland hadn't had any limbs amputated, nor did he have any stories of gory sexual abuse to make the book clubs gasp and snatch up the book in a mixture of compassion and schadenfreude.

Griffin couldn't take the silence. He had not been excited to come on this dinner because of the overpriced fish. He had come because Veronica, who looked stunning in her black sequined dress, would be at his table, laughing and showcasing that smile that made him feel light-headed. He was going to start a conversation somehow. He scanned the room for conversation-starters. He wasn't sure how much conversation could be made about waiters' aprons and curved, arty lamps. Suddenly, his eyes came to rest on the menu. Splendid, he thought, as he began to read what he hoped would be a captivating, conversation-inducing entrée description. "What do you think," he ventured courageously, "Of the Tuscan salmon with olive, carrot, and parsley garnish, topped with cranberry-potato whiskey sauce over tossed juniper berries and served with a side of seasonal peas with a light drizzle of herring meringue glaze?"

"I thought this was fish," said Layland, who had never been more confused in his life.

"I think it tastes great," said Veronica enthusiastically, happy to finally be conversing. She had considered bringing some conversational topic to the table, but decided that, since there were no spiders to squash or skylights to install, it should be the man's job. "It's very tasty."

Griffin agreed. The conversation had gone nowhere. He had wasted five seconds of his life having a meaningless conversation about a dinner entrée. He thought that guys and their girlfriends did more interesting stuff together. Then again, they did most

of that interesting stuff on beaches. "Um...do you like beaches?" he asked. To Griffin, it was a very logical thought process.

Veronica wasn't sure how a conversation about salmon had somehow transformed itself into a conversation about beaches, but she would find a way to make sense of it—after all, salmon did come from the sea, and beaches were next to the sea. "Beaches are nice," she said.

Desperate to keep the conversation going, like a beach ball at a rock concert, Griffin attempted another desperate punch. "Do you like to, like...sunbathe and stuff?" If that topic fell flat, at least he would be able to entertain himself with images of Veronica sunbathing in a bikini, the rays of sun caressing her back like his hand would, if he wasn't worried about that being too big of a step and her back wasn't separated from him by a banquet table.

"Yeah," she said. "I like to sunbathe."

"What do you like about sunbathing?" asked Griffin, determined to keep the conversation going, like a collector who tries to keep restoring his old jalopy even when it's dwindled down to nothing but a nostalgic pile of rubble.

"I dunno..." she said. "It feels nice on my back, I guess. And, you know, when I tan, I look good."

"You always look good," Griffin interjected.

"Really? Thanks," she grinned. "You're so sweet."

Layland had had enough. He had to eat—and sustain—his dinner. Flirtatious banter wasn't enough to make him sick, but the fact that he was single made the flirtatious banter taunt him to the point where he wanted to down seven glasses of Coke in two minutes, which, he knew from previous experience, was not a reliable method of sustaining one's dinner. He had to steer everything away from lovey-dovey talk. "Cookie Monster," he said. "Opinions. Go."

"I used to love him!" squealed Veronica. "I watched him on Sesame Street all the time, and he was like Grrrrblgrmmphphhhxxxx." She pantomimed shoving an endless sea of cookies into her mouth.

"What's Sesame Street?" asked Griffin. From what he had just heard, it sounded like a show where a bunch of animals named after foods made various grunting sounds

while pretending to eat. Being a spy, he recalled wistfully, had never fully given him an opportunity to immerse himself in toddler pop culture.

"It's basically a long puppet show with a lot of songs for little kids," Veronica explained.

From there, the conversation spiraled into a whirlwind of different topics. When Griffin had time, between laughter and comebacks and sips of Diet Coke, he marveled at Layland's talent to start a conversation—any conversation. His talent to make risqué jokes was also impeccable, Griffin thought as he struggled to keep himself from laughing with a mouthful of coke. Drenched joke-tellers, he reminded himself, are normally no longer good joke-tellers.

Griffin was having a hell of a time. Veronica was smiling, he was smiling, they were smiling at each other, Layland was smiling, even the White House aides at the next table discussing nuclear nonproliferation seemed to be smiling. The undercooked fish had been forgotten, and the three of them fed instead off their laughter, and (for the boys) occasional glances at Veronica's cleavage.

President Carr wasn't a suspicious person—probably not suspicious enough, given his tendency to donate to Saudi Arabian orphans who never existed via Paypal. However, his maternal instincts (single parenting had necessitated that he master both the maternal and paternal sixth senses) prompted him to be suspicious of any teenage boy having a laugh and some undercooked fish with his daughter. He stood up and stared protectively at the three. They paid no attention.

President Carr decided it was time to take matters into his own hands. Before, he had counted on the media to teach Veronica to remain chaste, but that time had passed. It was time to talk to this kid, this "Griffin", who Veronica went to see that movie with, and show him a glimpse of the full fury of the president, and also throw around some deportation threats. Anne would have stopped him (she remembered all too well the last time the President tried to take matters into his own hands and ordered an airstrike on protesters in Topeka—one that she quickly aborted, of course), but she was too busy making conversation with Secretary of State Heimerdinger about how best to improve relations with Turkmenistan.

President Carr narrowly avoided the suck-upy interns as he made his way over to Veronica's table. Praise from ambitious college students was nice, but he was on a

mission, and he would not be stopped, except by a giant boulder or that reporter from the Playboy channel. He edged towards their table, trying to remember which one Griffin was—the dark-haired one or the one who always smirked? He hedged his bets, and, for his initial show of main dominance, outstretched each hand over a boy's head and lowered it, tightening his fingers and enveloping their heads in a death grip. And if the brain-sucking hand wasn't enough to waylay his daughter's suitors, he wasn't above a good old-fashioned kick to the family jewels.

"Hi, Daddy!" Veronica greeted her father eagerly, taking no notice of Griffin and Layland's painful grimaces. "What's up?"

"Just checking on you, honey," President Carr said sweetly, squeezing the heads tighter. "Who're your friends?"

"Oh! That one," she said, pointing to Griffin, "Is Griffin, and that's Layland. Guys, say hi to Daddy!"

"Hello," chorused Griffin and Layland meekly, their heads feeling like toys gripped by the crane in one of those stupid cheat-you-out-of-a-buck games at a pizza place.

That was all President Carr needed to know. "Let's go," he said abruptly, seizing Griffin's collar and yanking him away. He searched around for a back room, basement, alley, or other place where stronger guys generally go to beat weaker guys up in the movies.

Griffin reminded himself to show courage under pressure. He could break out of the man's vicelike grip with a twist, and disable him with a well-placed kick. Then again, the man in question was his girlfriend's father. Then again, if he didn't stop now, Griffin's head might become misshapen, and who would want a boyfriend with a misshapen head?

President Carr guided him violently towards the back wall. A curious server looked over to see what was going on, but Carr shooed him away with a wave of his hand. "So," he said. He wasn't sure where to go from here. He didn't like having to intimidate people. Then again, it was their fault that they didn't know precisely what he wanted. He gave the kid a once-over and reconsidered his plan. The kid looked tough. President Carr was never one to doubt his own physical abilities—he wasn't sure what they were, but was positive that they existed—but he was fully aware that no matter

how strong he, The Decider, was, this kid was probably stronger. Even he knew that physical formidability is not first nature to someone who considers pie a principal food group.

"Yes?" asked Griffin, trying to help Carr along with his massive inarticulacy.

"So. You and my daughter."

Griffin wasn't really sure if there was an answer to that. It wasn't even a question. It wasn't even a sentence—there were no verbs. "What?"

"Are you guys..."

"Going out?" asked Griffin.

"Well, that too. That's good. You treating her nice and everything?" President Carr said this in the gruffest voice possible, hoping that the sheer intensity of his voice would castrate Griffin, or at least scare him a bit.

"Yes, sir," said Griffin eagerly. "She's amazing."

He meant it, too, President Carr could tell. Maybe the kid wasn't such a bad guy after all. Then again, that's what he'd thought about OJ Simpson.

"Well, OK. Just making sure you guys aren't doing, you know. None of this." He made a hole in his fist and poked a forefinger through it, symbolizing sex.

To Griffin, it looked like President Carr was trying to fix an imaginary wall socket. He and Veronica hadn't been disguising themselves as electricians at all! Why would the president—the president, of all people—think that. "What?" he asked. Surely he didn't think that teenage girls like to pass the time with their boyfriends fixing appliances.

"You know..." President Carr combed his mind, searching his myriad collection of sexual metaphors for the ones that were most recognizable. "Hot dog into the bun...you know what I'm saying?"

Griffin knew exactly what President Carr was saying—of course they had never gone to get hot dogs. Veronica had told him and Layland that she absolutely detested hot dogs. Did the president really know his own daughter that little? "No!" he said, shaking his head vehemently. "Of course not."

That was all President Carr needed to hear. "Good. Good kid," he said, before having second thoughts and contorting his face into a mass of anger. "But if you *ever* try to pull something like that, I will rip you in half. Got it?"

On second thought, Griffin mused, maybe Carr did know more about his daughter than Griffin had given him credit for. He certainly knew about her hatred for hot dogs. He had made that much very clear. Griffin appreciated the man's defense of his daughter's taste buds. Maybe he wasn't that much of an imbecile after all. "Yes, sir," he said dutifully.

President Carr nodded. He wondered if he should ask the kid to salute, but decided not to—the kid understood who was boss. "All right. Go have fun." He let Griffin go, as a tear formed in the corner of his eye. Ah, to be young again, where sex made you a hero among your peers and not a pariah flayed alive by the tabloids and his chief of staff.

Griffin rejoined Veronica and Layland at their table. "What did Daddy want to say to you?" asked Veronica.

Griffin shrugged, like an evangelical Christian who had been asked to explain the concept of separation of church and state. "I dunno. Something about hot dogs."

"Ugh! I hate hot dogs!" Veronica knew she had already said this, but felt the need to reiterate it, just in case Griffin had any ideas about taking her to hot dog stands. "It's not the taste really, more, like, the texture."

"I know," concurred Griffin. "They feel so weird in your mouth."

Layland collapsed laughing, and Griffin did not know why.

When you open your closet, you expect to find things like shoes, shirts, suits, and the like. With Layland sleeping in the same room (though that night he'd been sent to clean up a spill in the Roosevelt Room), there was always a possibility that Griffin would open a closet to find a candy bar or adult magazine come tumbling out. But when Griffin peeled back his closet door as usual, he found The Man standing inside. The Man did not look pleased.

To show his displeasure, The Man jumped out of the closet, glared at Griffin, and grabbed him by the head. "What HAPPENED?" he asked, shaking Griffin's head roughly, like an irate vending-machine patron trying to retrieve his extra quarter.

"I couldn't do it," Griffin managed to exert these words despite the constantly changing location of his head.

The Man, in surprise, loosened his grip on Griffin's head, giving Griffin the perfect opportunity to wrench himself out of The Man's grip. "What do you mean," he asked, with a disbelieving sneer, "you couldn't do it?"

"Just what I said." Griffin's voice was wavering, but courage was flooding into him like a hurricane floods into a coastal town neglected by FEMA. He braced his feet and clenched his fists. "I couldn't do it."

The Man shook his head. "They said you could do anything. *Anything*. And now this?"

"I don't WANT to do it," Griffin clarified. He figured that he was already not on good terms with the man, admitting to willful neglect of duty couldn't make The Man's opinion of him go that much lower.

The Man's opinion of Griffin fell to the floor, dug into the ground, and made a beeline for the earth's core. "You don't WANT to do it? What sort of excuse is that? Furthermore, what's with the excuses? It's not about what you want, it's about—are you listening to me?"

Griffin had not been listening to The Man. He had been thinking about Veronica. "It's a personal thing," he said.

"A personal thing," seethed The Man. "A personal thing. A PERSONAL THING?"

"Repetition isn't necessary. I heard myself the first time," Griffin mock-chided The Man, hoping to goad him into a fight. Griffin was ready to fight to protect his

girlfriend, his girlfriend's father, his new life, his watching TV and listening to Layland's sex jokes. He was already exerting immense self-control by keeping himself from rocketing a fist into The Man's temple. Even The Man's temples looked angry.

"It's a girl, isn't it?" asked The Man, his anger bubbling like a soup left on the stove too long. "That's what this is. It's her, isn't it? His daughter?"

"What's it to you?" asked Griffin, giving The Man a cold, hard stare.

The Man took that to mean "yes". It was a shame, really. The boy had shown promise, but now he was too far gone to ever bring back. The Man would have to do this job himself. "Pity," he sighed nonchalantly as he swung the butt of his gun into the side of Griffin's head. Griffin crumpled to the ground. The Man wondered whether to dispose of him or not, but decided to keep his eye on the ball—the President was still down the hall, sleeping.

The Man edged out of the door and crept down the hall, his sneakers treading noiselessly on the carpeted floor. He quickened his pace—there wasn't much time to lose. He checked his gun again, making sure it was loaded—it was never a good career move to shoot at an assassination target with a gun full of blanks.

As The Man popped the magazine out of the chamber and examined it to make sure everything was in order, Griffin, spurred by a mix of testosterone, desperation, and that Red Bull he'd shared with Layland earlier, flew down the hall and tackled The Man.

Griffin's skills came back to him now. The Man threw up wild punches and blocks, but Griffin was smaller and more agile, avoiding the blows and adding some of his own. The Man kept a firm grip on the gun, which worried Griffin, and whenever he would lash out at it, The Man pulled his hand back. Griffin knew he needed to stop The Man, but also noticed that as the fight went on, The Man had been edging it closer and closer towards the door of the President's room. So many things—going to the movies with Veronica, racing go-karts and playing video games with Layland, watching Veronica slaughter her friends at tennis—flashed through Griffin's mind as he summoned all his resolve and made a final stand, launching himself into the air and landing squarely on the man's head. He grabbed down and held on tightly, hoping to remove some necessary facial features.

If Griffin had had any training in the past weeks, he would have realized that it was not, in retrospect, a good idea. He realized it indeed when The Man swept his stun

gun out of his pocket and delivered a staggering shock to Griffin's leg. Griffin immediately let go of The Man's head and lay speechless on the floor as The Man continued on to the President's room.

Griffin laid there immobilized, the 50,000-volt charge from the stun gun coursing through his veins and leaving him rigid. He waited for it to subside, but by the time it did, it was too late—The Man had drawn his gun and was easing open the door to the President's bedroom. Griffin summoned every last ounce of strength and will in his body and charged like a speeding missile at The Man, leaping off his feet at the last second and slamming into The Man, propelling him through the door into the President's bedroom.

"What the HELL?" yelled President Carr's voice in the dark. A light switched on, and there sat President Carr, lying in bed with a young woman who looked about as wasted as a rock star on their birthday and about as legal as grand larceny.

President Carr was not used to people barging into his room in the middle of the night. When they did, they were either Anne, bringing him bad news, or a guest in the Lincoln Bedroom, asking him to turn his television down. Most of the time, though, they knocked first. President Carr wasn't as mad as he was worried. What was this country coming to? If no one had the courtesy to knock anymore, God knew whether or not they'd have the courtesy to pay taxes, and if they didn't pay taxes, his primary means of purchasing energy drinks and Hustler magazines would be cut off. Then he saw the gun in The Man's hand. Now he was even more worried.

The Man had, miraculously, managed to maintain a firm hold on his gun, even with Griffin slamming into his back unannounced. He shoved Griffin away with one hand and raised the gun with the other, aiming at the President. Griffin lunged angrily, his teeth gnashing, but The Man beat him back with his free arm. His lips curled into a smile. "Goodbye, President Carr," he said.

President Carr did not say goodbye back. He was hiding under the covers. *It's just a dream*, he convinced himself. *Just a dream. Just a dream.* He considered pinching himself to make sure it was a dream after all. But then, on top of having a man pointing a gun at him, his arm would hurt. He decided to just wait this one out. Someone had always gotten him through his tough scrapes.

Just as The Man's finger began to tighten on the trigger, Veronica appeared in the door. Veronica was accustomed to hearing loud noises coming from her father's bedroom at night. She just wasn't accustomed to them being male noises. She had come to investigate, and was surprised to find her boyfriend wrestling with a man who was pointing a gun at her father, who was in bed with a woman that Veronica took little notice of because, well, her boyfriend was wrestling with a man who was pointing a gun at her father. "What's going on?" she said, trying to keep her voice from quavering out of fear, and succeeding—but it was tough. "I'm calling the secret service!"

The Man turned and saw the teenage girl, in tight-fitting pajama pants and a long, baggy t-shirt, in the doorway. Normally, he would have convinced himself that she wasn't a threat. He would have been able to take out the President and leave before she had said anything about the Secret Service. But—he was almost positive—this was the ewe that had caused his sheep—Griffin—to stray from the flock. The casualty—physical or moral—of a spy was a regrettable thing, and The Man was of the opinion that the perpetrator of such an act should always be punished. He pivoted to face Veronica, aiming the gun at her. "No, you're not."

Griffin reacted immediately. "NO!" he shouted. He lost all control of his actions—his body made the decisions for him, lunging at The Man, grabbing and twisting at his gun arm, lashing out with his feet. The two wrestled on the floor, trading scratches and jabs, grappling for the gun.

A shot went off.

Veronica screamed, looking on, horrified, at the two bodies on the floor. She could see blood. Suddenly, she saw one move. The bodies were intertwined in such a way that she couldn't tell which was which.

Griffin lifted his head up. The Man had stopped struggling, which could only be good. He looked at the ever-expanding pool of blood on the floor. That was definitely good.

"Griffin?" Veronica ran over to him and helped him up. "Are you—are you OK?"

Griffin exhaled heavily. "He's not going to hurt anyone now," he panted.

Veronica looked at Griffin with sheer admiration. She took his tired face in both her hands—the way she saw the people do in movies—and drew hers to it, pressing her mouth against his and kissing him passionately. Griffin, for all his bruises, felt the best

that he had ever felt on his life as Veronica's lips connected with his. He returned her kiss as he watched his past life bleed to death on the carpet before him.

The woman in bed next to Carr had awoken at the gunshot. She watched the two kids kiss, nodding sympathetically. She turned to President Carr. "You know," she said seductively, "This would be a good time for you to kiss me."

"Can't," mumbled Carr, "Too hungover." He rolled over and went back to sleep.

THE END