

PROLOGUE

IN A COUNTRY YET TO BE BORN

May of the year 1756 A.D.

North of Paris, France

“Madam d’Epinay, your hospitality is even more exquisite than I was led to expect.”

“You are too kind, my Dear Colonel Rochambeau,” responds the ever gracious solonniere, as her guests again find their chairs in the elegantly furnished parlor of Le Chateau de La Chevrette, in the Montmorency valley, two hours north, by carriage, from Paris. She has gathered an amalgam of characters for the discussion this day. There is an engaging, though a bit jittery, high official from the Bourse, the Paris stock exchange. Also present are a decorated military officer, a scientist who is also the Master of his lodge of Freemasons, the gregarious proprietor of Le Café de Procope, and, of course, one renowned philosopher. Having surveyed the group and satisfied herself as to the comfort of her visitors, Louise d’Epinay is the last to be seated.

“I believe Messieurs Rochambeau and Rousseau had begun a most interesting conversation just before the refreshments were served. Pray continue,” prompts Madam D’Epinay.

The dashing colonel of cavalry, in a stiff full-dress uniform, takes his cue.

“Yes, Monsieur Rousseau, I was hoping to learn more of your thoughts about democracy as a form of government. But, first, may I satisfy my curiosity on another matter?”

“By all means,” responds the eminent philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, as he sets his plate of confections on a nearby table.

“Thank you,” continues Rochambeau. “I believe you sometimes refer to yourself as Citizen Rousseau. Why might that be, sir?”

“Yes, I have acquired that habit,” replies Rousseau. “You see, I regard Citizen as the highest title or rank to which a common man, as myself, might aspire. Of course, I make reference to the philosophy that prevailed in ancient Athens. At the peak of Athenian glory, its citizens took their duties very seriously. Being given the right to vote on a law by which all would be governed, entailed an obligation to become fully and objectively informed on the matter. In addition, citizens were expected to willingly answer any call to public service, as the need arose.”

“I see,” responds the colonel. “From that statement I might well deduce that you regard the subjects of the present-day monarchy as being of a lesser order, since we are rarely involved in the making of laws.”

“Your deduction, sir, would be correct,” responds Citizen Rousseau, with the hint of a smile. “Governments do tend to reserve to themselves the task of law-making, do they not?”

"Indeed. I suppose that brings us back to my original line of inquiry," comments Colonel Rochambeau. "You seem to regard democracy as the highest of all the forms of government. Is it for that reason – that the right to legislate is spread more widely?"

"That is a part of it, but not all," responds the philosopher. "I do believe that democracy offers certain advantages over other forms of governing. In my view, colonel, in a truly good state, a government would serve to enable every man to achieve their fullest potential. The government should require that each citizen exercise their faculties and broaden their minds in pursuit of what is best for all their countrymen. Thus, the whole soul of the common man is uplifted and ennobled."

Jean-Jacque Rousseau takes a quick sip of his coffee before continuing. "Obviously, more autocratic forms of government will not have these lofty goals as their principal concern."

Jean-Baptiste Donatien, Comte de Rochambeau, presently a colonel of cavalry, gathers his thoughts before continuing what has become a dialogue for an audience of four. "Then, if all governments should, as you seem to imply, aspire to become a good state, would not education of the bourgeoisie become an imperative?"

"Yes, of course," replies Rousseau.

The military officer continues, "and, yet, if the government assumes this duty, will it not naturally control the information provided to the masses, so that they are left with half-truths, and even falsehoods, on which to base their decisions?"

"You make an excellent observation, my friend. I think the source of political information must not be only the government. Therefore, I am encouraged by the appearance of gazettes and journals in recent decades. These are serving to inform more and more of our people and, I believe, will one day cause the common folk of France to question the inequities that today define their society."

"Are you talking about a revolution, Monsieur Rousseau?" asks the gentleman from the Bourse with alarm in his voice.

"Time will tell. Time will tell," is the philosopher's evasive response.

Madam D'Epinay interjects, "Then, Monsieur Rousseau, you do believe France capable of becoming a democracy in the future, perhaps even one that counts women among its citizens?"

"My wonderful, precocious Louise, the role of women in society is the topic for another day. But I am doubtful that democracy could be enacted on the national level. I have seen it work beautifully in the cantons of Switzerland. There, the citizens can easily gather to exchange views and then vote on issues of common concern. That is also the feature that allowed democracy to work for a time in Athens."

"Sadly," continues Rousseau, "it seems that every attempt to enlarge the concept results in citizens working through representatives who meet in some distant place and, supposedly, vote on their behalf. But I warn you, as soon as

the Citizenry gives itself representatives, they begin to forsake their sacred duty and forfeit their natural sovereignty.”

Colonel Rochambeau takes a drink of his coffee and then dabs his lips with a delicate lace napkin while he ponders the last exchange. Then he continues the conversation. “I wonder, Citizen Rousseau, whether your pessimism is a bit pre-mature. Perhaps our scientific friend here will agree. I am imagining how the great philosophers of Greece, more than 2000 years in the past, would have regarded the invention of the printing press. Surely, such a device would be beyond their capacity to imagine. Would you all agree?”

Each of the visitors and the hostess register their support for the colonel’s point. Rousseau responds cautiously, “I would concede to that.”

Rochambeau continues, “Today, we are able to disperse the written word across the globe, and it seems to me that science is advancing at an ever-quickenning pace. Therefore, I would not too quickly dismiss the notion that, at some time in the future, much sooner than two millennia, and perhaps in some country which has yet to be born, the science would be commonplace that allows citizens to very rapidly share their ideas, even over great expanses.”

Louise d’Epinay displays excitement at this conjecture, and adds, “If such a wonder were to exist, perhaps citizens could also send their votes over great expanses to some central place for counting, no?”

“I believe that if Man can imagine something, it can be done,” comments Rochambeau. “What say you Citizen Rousseau?”

“Well, such voyages of the intellect are certainly entertaining. So, if I may attempt to summarize your point, colonel: you would argue that science will one day overcome the bastions of time and distance, so that democracy might indeed be practiced on a much grander scale. Is that a fair representation?”

“It is, sir. That is a fine summary – very well stated.”

The philosopher takes another sip of Madam d’Epinay’s wonderful coffee before continuing. My feeling, gentlemen, is that the future you envision is but idle fancy. Nevertheless, I do aspire to keep my mind open to new ideas, and, it is truly said that those who claim things impossible are often shown the fool.”



CHAPTER 1

ONE HELLUVA DEAL

Sunday, December 3rd (Back to the future)

Denver, CO

It is the end. It's the end of another magnificent vision, one that has demanded the labors of a thousand quiet patriots for all too many years. This dark realization consumes Mr. Theodore "Smokey" Weston on an otherwise crystalline December morning. *The movement will die out*, thinks Smokey. *I might as well go with it.*

Weston is chairman of the most successful third party to join the American political scene in decades. Two floors of the Lucent Building in southwest Denver serve as party headquarters. Smokey's view from the seventh-floor conference room is to the west. Gradually the sun begins to illuminate the entire Front Range, a spectacle that normally demands optimism for all that life may offer. The scene is glorious, beyond anything a mortal artist may hope to capture and, today, utterly wasted on Mr. Weston's soul.

This man had once before been broken and descended to the sub-basement of despair. Back then, God had seen fit to veto Smokey's bid to end it all. As he recovered, Weston reasoned that there must be some task remaining on his celestial "To Do" list. And for the past several years he thought he had discovered exactly what that was. Now it appears to have been a delusion, or a monumentally cruel and impractical joke.

Recognizing that self-pity has a boot to his throat, Weston forces himself to think of the others whose dreams have been destroyed as well. His first thought is of Ira Rappaport, their presidential candidate. *Imagine what poor Ira must be going through now.*

Though physically diminutive, Ira was hardly a weak man. He had triumphed over every adversity the business world could summon and emerged at the head of a communications technology empire. On Wall Street, he was the new Napoleon -- Napoleon with a Texas drawl, but no less acquisitive.

This was a leader who drew breath from the challenge, and so created most of his own. One day, as a polished young executive made a presentation to Mr. Rappaport and the corporate board, the Chairman's eyes grew wide and drifted to a framed landscape on the wall. The briefing began to flounder until one board member had the nerve to ask Mr. Rappaport whether anything was wrong.

"I'm bored," he said softly as if awed by the revelation. "I need to move on." He rose to exit, and by habit walked in the direction of his opulent office. Then he halted, not twenty steps from the Board Room. There was nothing he needed from there -- not now. As he passed the Guard Desk, Rappaport dropped his security card on the counter with a nod and a smile.

Ira always fixed the beginning of the movement to the evening of March twenty-third, barely two weeks after the abrupt closure of his corporate life. The

unemployed Rappaport was getting re-acquainted with first editions he had collected for a personal library. A volume he had studied in graduate school caught his eye. It was *Democratic Vistas* by Walt Whitman.

With a grin, Ira recalled the semester he'd been forced to read Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Rousseau, Jefferson, and other democratic theorists. Ira enjoyed recounting this life-altering experience to his close friends. Of course, in typical Rappaport fashion, he likened the event to a heavy dose of Drano on an intellectual pipe that had been clogged for years. He settled into a comfortable chair and opened the delicate cover.

Ira read for some time, enamored with Whitman's poetic vision -- and frustrated by the lack of a practical plan. Rappaport was a practical man. Then one sentence bolted from the page and caused the reader's mind to race as never before.

*We have frequently printed the word Democracy
yet I cannot too often repeat that it is a word the
real gist of which still sleeps, quite unawakened . . .
It is a great word, whose history, I suppose
remains unwritten, because that history
has yet to be enacted.*

The thoughts tripped and stumbled over each other as Ira struggled to put them in order. *Whitman was right. America had never really tried democracy. It settled for something less. But democracy must reach its full potential. Only then can mankind reach its full potential as well. Now there's an enterprise worthy of complete devotion. And who better to take that vision through to practical implementation? That's what I do.*

Thus was born the Independent Party. Rappaport soon beguiled a dozen struggling groups from the fringes of American political life, just as he'd seduced business leaders in the past. His genius and sheer energy molded them into a political movement. Then it became more than a movement; it became a crusade to recover the vision of democracy that America seemed to have lost. And at the head of this evangelic throng rode the noble Rappaport with gleaming mental shield and serrated verbal sword. No, Ira was strong. But every man has his limits, his vulnerabilities, his Waterloo or Dulcinea.

Smokey Weston's feelings now ran parallel to those of his friend and mentor -- a mix of desperation, rage, and humiliation. Ira could not even make the call from Dallas himself. His wife, Dixie, told Weston what had happened on Saturday.

"It was right after dinner," Dixie said, "though the few that touched their food simply did so to be polite." Little Sydney was missing, and the clan had been gathering all day for solace.

The first ring of the phone sent a momentary chill through every person in the home, even the children -- especially the children. Twice before a call had come at precisely seven p.m. Ira let it ring three times, as directed, before activating the device the FBI installed to help trace the call -- not that it would do any good. Like a stale police script, the ominous caller knew precisely when to get off the line. Ira lifted the receiver to his ear with dread.

The digitally reconstructed voice was by now familiar. So was the caller's intent. "Apparently, you didn't take our previous warnings seriously, Mr. Rappaport. Your granddaughter is now our guest. She's a lovely girl. Leave the race within twenty-four hours, and Sydney will find her way home safe and sound. You have my word of honor. However, Mr. Rappaport, there will be no further warnings." A rude click ended the message, and much more.

Ira collapsed into the nearest chair, phone receiver still in hand, staring off into his own oblivion. Only when Dixie laid a questioning hand on his shoulder did he raise his bowed head.

What Dixie Rappaport felt at that instant frightened her deeply. In her beloved husband's eyes, she saw the pain and disbelief of a defeat so total there would be no salvation, no recourse, no recovery, not ever. All she could think to do was put her soft, warm fingers on the back of his neck and massage it gently as she often did. Defeat was a new experience -- for both of them.

Within an hour of the threatening call, Ira's Press Secretary alerted the media to stand by for a major announcement the next morning. Whatever the cost, Ira would see his precious Sydney back in the arms of her parents.

Dixie hadn't actually used the word "defeat." Smokey could simply hear it in her trembling goodbye.

Mr. Weston shared his quarters with Defeat that Saturday night. It smirked at him from every corner, as Smokey struggled to find a way out of his rapidly shrinking future. The options were not plentiful.

Very early Sunday morning, Smokey used his phone to summon the core of his headquarters staff, telling them only that it was urgent. Two additional calls were made to the eastern time zone. Then he proceeded to the Lucent Building in the winter darkness, not yet sure what he would say or how he might say it.

The end. The words reverberate in Smokey's mind. Sure, they'd try to salvage the movement, but who could recapture the force and clarity of Ira's voice? Who could sell the idea the way he had? Who could keep the numerous factions in line, each with its pet idea for a perfect world? Who would be fool enough to try? The big-party bastards were going to win after all, and Smokey's one shot at making a difference in the world would be forever swept away. "Crap," mutters Weston as he senses the others arriving. "Now I'll have to put on my leader face."

"What's up, Smokey?" The question substitutes for the usual pleasantries as Angel McCracken sweeps gracefully through the conference room door. She's the first of several staff members who arrive simultaneously. The nickname "Angel" usually fits this alluring and affable Vassar grad, though she isn't feeling

all that heavenly this morning. In the rush to get here, she'd left a few strands of cream-colored hair out of place. This is entirely out of character.

"Yeah, how come the six a.m. wake-up man, and on a Sunday too? This better be damn good." This retort is from Duff Scroggin, the youngest member of the staff, and the one most likely to be engaged in apolitical activities on a Saturday night. In fact, it looks like Smokey's call, quite possibly, hadn't found him at home. John Halbert and the others offer a courteous, "Good morning, sir," but get no response.

Smokey spins his wheelchair around and pulls himself to the conference table. His grim expression, made that much darker for lack of sleep, silences all further protest. The half-dozen attendees slip quietly into their chairs and respectfully wait for whatever pronouncement is coming.

The boss may possess the demeanor of an old Montana cowpoke, thinks McCracken, but there isn't a more gifted political strategist anywhere in the country. This must be serious.

Sunday, December 3rd

Ft. Worth, TX

The 9:00 a.m. announcement at the Rappaport's suburban mansion is much too cryptic to satisfy the reporters who have gathered at the entrance. "For reasons of health, I will be unable to continue my campaign for the presidency." The pundits don't buy it for a minute. It does, however, allow them to exercise their limitless powers of speculation. It will be a good news day.

Sunday, December 3rd

Atlanta, GA

As the meeting opens in Denver, a man in Atlanta is also gazing out a large office window. His view, however, is of the hazy gray mountains of concrete and steel along Broad Street.

Gene Kirby, Director of the Broadcast News Division at the Global News Network (GNN), is spending another Sunday at the office. It's getting old, but it beats the alternative. As much as he wants it, domestic bliss has somehow eluded Kirby, more than once. Now he's making up reasons to go in to work. This morning, he's thinking that maybe he thinks about it too much.

Gene's weekly self-flagellation is interrupted, as an assistant whisks through the door with the latest Associated Press dispatches. Kirby's able lieutenant wastes little time on a greeting, launching directly into the expected sound-bite summary.

"Morning, boss. North Koreans are rattling sabers again. The term limits case goes to the Supreme Court this coming week, and Rappaport just quit as the Independent Party candidate, for reasons of health, if you can believe that.

They'll either cash it in or scramble to find another sucker before their January convention."

That last item grabs Kirby's attention. "Damn," exclaims Gene as he twists into a position square with his desk. "With O'Hanlon in self-destruct mode, it'll be a Stoddard landslide." He sighs loudly. "Well, keep me posted on that one."

O'Hanlon is Patrick O'Hanlon, the sitting Vice President of the United States. His seven years in office have been marked by seemingly habitual lapses in judgment -- political and "other." The rank and file of the Republican Party would prefer to abandon the embarrassing, lackluster O'Hanlon. The inner circle, however, refuses to forfeit the supposed advantage of incumbency.

The Democratic challenger, Senator Rathburn Stoddard, is no dream candidate either. Known as a master of the backroom deal, there are those who claim he's the Jimmy Dean of political-flavored pork. The Democrats simply feel they owe him this run at the top. Their carefully crafted seniority system might otherwise collapse. The Senator's one political virtue is total rejection of the old-fashioned notion that it's not whether you win or lose; it's how you play the game. Stoddard will do whatever it takes to win the game.

Gene Kirby continues to ponder the implications. For folks in his line of work, the Rappaport factor was the only ray of hope for an otherwise mundane campaign season. Ira Rappaport had used his money and fame to forge an unprecedented coalition of reform-minded organizations. The experts had scoffed at a third-party bid a few months earlier. Now they acknowledged it. Rappaport had successfully tapped into the "none-of-the-above" vote, and he'd begun to worry the major parties. But that was yesterday.

Sunday, December 3rd

Denver, CO

"Okay, folks, let's come to order." Smokey is ready to break the news to the key Denver staff. "We've got ourselves a little disaster here." Weston glances at his watch as if he actually needed to check the time.

"Only a little while ago our presidential candidate announced nationally that he's dropping out of the race, for reasons of health. It has nothing much to do with health," scoffs Weston.

The reaction around the table is disbelief, dejection, and anger, in random order depending on the individual. There are also a hundred emerging questions. Smokey wisely lets them vent their feelings and allocates time for this altered reality to take hold. Then he taps a spoon on his now tepid mug of coffee. Order is soon restored, and Weston continues the briefing.

"Confidentially, Ira's been getting credible threats against himself and his family for some time. You can guess the source as well as I can. Only Stoddard would gain from eliminating the independent candidate. So, Friday afternoon they acted, kidnapping Ira's granddaughter. Of course, there's no proof it was the senator. It just smells like him. O'Hanlon wouldn't have the guts or the brains.

"Ira and Dixie are sure the little girl will be returned safely, but this incident has shaken their entire family to the core. Ira now feels there is no choice but to drop out. He'll help in other ways, of course, but he can no longer be an effective candidate for us."

Around the table, there's a natural moment of silence, as if remembering a fallen comrade. Weston allows this. Then he must get them back to the business at hand.

"We still have old Maggie Russell as our VP candidate, but she says she's not comfortable being top dog. I think we have to respect her wishes on that." Weston's tone makes it clear this issue is already settled.

"Now, we've all put a lot of years into creating this here political party. I don't have to remind you that we are a very fragile collection of renegades, and it's about to all fall apart, unless we can round up a new presidential candidate with as much national stature and political savvy as Ira Rappaport, and I mean pronto. That won't be easy, but the option is to fold our tents and go home. Of course, that's just what the people who did this to Ira would like to see happen. That's about it. Let me hear those wheels start turnin', people."

Clarity comes slowly now. Mental sprockets struggle to engage and regain normal momentum. It's hard.

John Halbert is the first to share a thought. Smokey's a bit surprised. John is usually the most introspective of the veteran staff. On the other hand, he's also the most passionate, once you look beneath the almost Vulcan facade he displays to the public.

"General Robert Hollander," says Mr. Halbert with conviction. Hollander is a former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, the first Black to hold that position. The last war brought him into the public eye as he gave daily briefings to the press. A calm, military professionalism had earned him nationwide respect. "He'd be exactly the kind of charismatic leader we need now."

Weston nods and responds. "Great minds think alike. I already called him this morning. The general supports our overall platform but won't budge from his decision not to run. Can't blame him much, given the kind of bull crap that goes on in these campaigns." John slumps in dejection. General Hollander is a personal, as well as a national, hero.

Angel McCracken speaks next, also nominating a favorite role model. "Well, how about Patricia Saunders? She was one terrific congresswoman. If we could"

Duff Scroggin cuts her off. "Right. Even if we could get Sanders on board, if we run an all-female ticket, we're dead. Sorry Angel, but get real!" McCracken hadn't thought of that, or had subconsciously discounted it. She sadly concedes the point.

Scroggin wants to suggest that the man at the head of the table take up the flag, but he can't bring himself to say it. He's not yet sure what makes old Smokey tick. Duff glances at John across the table and subtly cocks his head toward Smokey. John understands the message instantly. He responds with an imperceptible shake of the head. *Drop it.*

Silence returns as disoriented minds search for other options. Desperation joins the group. Finally, at the far end of the table, the clearing of a throat brings relief from an uneasy quiet.

Vicky Brazil rarely contributes to these meetings, preferring instead to take the minutes. As an immigrant, she never feels equal to the others in political discussions, not really. It seems, however, that they need a little help today.

As everyone turns to give Vicky their attention, they see the petite Asian beauty studying a photo on the inside cover of a magazine. She apparently brought it to the meeting to fill the expected dull spots. Now it's lying open on the table.

"Excuse me, please. Maybe Mr. T. J. Carroll? There has not been a more respected journalist since Walter Cronkite. Reading his editorials, I would say he is no friend of the Republicans or the Democrats. People certainly know his name. We could build on that, could we not?" Having finished her pitch, Vicky turns the magazine around and slides it to Angel.

"But no real political experience," comments John.

Angel comes to Vicky's aid. "Maybe that's another plus. Ira was a rookie when we started too." Then she passes the periodical to Duff.

Scroggin accepts the booklet and adds, "Well, this guy would at least know the issues."

The magazine eventually reaches Smokey. He has a quick look before starting it down the other side of the table. For now, he's more interested in the process than the details of the proposal. Smokey notes body language indicating some level of approval for Vicky's suggestion. He decides the group has probably done its best, given the circumstances and the short notice.

"Thank you very much, Vicky. Any other ideas?" As Smokey goes clockwise around the table, pointing at each attendee, they shake their heads or say no.

"Well then, I reckon we need to leave the Saunders option open. Let's make this simple." Weston finds an old nickel in his vest pocket, stands it on end and with the flick of his middle finger sends it spinning to the center of the table. "Heads, we go for Saunders; tails, Carroll."



The coin seems to spin in slow motion between John and Duff, lingering as if waiting for divine guidance. *This is surreal*, thinks Scroggin, *so many futures riding on a coin toss*. Finally, it topples, gyrates to rest, and reveals the image of Monticello. John reports the outcome to the group. Tails it is.

"John," orders Weston, "get us on the next plane to wherever we got to go to see Mr. Carroll. If he says no, we'll meet back here in two days. While we're gone, keep the talent search going, all of you."

Smokey waves the group away. After a moment, he wheels around to again stare blankly out the massive window. Gradually, the voices in the corridor fade and Smokey returns to the all-consuming task of lamenting what might have been.

Vicky Brazil waits till she's back in her cubicle before allowing a self-congratulatory smile. Then she muses, *That's one for the invisible office girl.*

Monday, December 4th

Atlanta, GA

In Atlanta, Gene Kirby and some of the staff are viewing a GNN tape of the Rappaport pronouncement for the third time. They share the opinion that this presidential candidate was a victim of his own success. Gene states that someone must have judged the Independent Party to be a real threat.

Kirby has it right. At precisely 2:30 a.m. that Monday, two cars entered a poorly lit parking lot east of Capitol Hill. They stopped with lights off, driver-side mirrors almost touching. An envelope was passed. The outcome desired by the client has been achieved and the little girl, Sydney Rappaport, will find her way home as promised. It will be a clean operation.

Wednesday, December 6th

Custer, SD

It took John Halbert most of a day to track down Mr. Carroll and finagle a meeting for Wednesday. As it happened, Carroll was visiting his primary home in South Dakota and the easiest way to get there was by car. It was about a seven-hour drive from Denver, almost due north.

Thomas Jefferson "T. J." Carroll has just finished exercising Plato, one of his favorite Nokota stallions. As they enter the yard, Carroll notes a blue minivan raising a plume of dust as it climbs the long gravel driveway.

Through the windshield, Weston notes that Carroll is built tall, straight, and slender. He envies the natural grace with which Carroll straddles the handsome horse. He carries himself like a cavalry officer of old. While Carroll dismounts Mr. Halbert parks the van. T. J. then delivers the reins to a grizzled old hired hand who leads the stallion away.

T. J. is a bit annoyed at the short notice given by these visitors, and by their persistence. However, the sight of a well-dressed Black man helping a disheveled and graying Caucasian guy into his wheelchair suppresses that feeling entirely. The three men exchange greetings and spend a moment admiring the splendid mountain scenery of the famous Black Hills. Then they move indoors.

Carroll's imposing log home sits on the crest of a rise with a breathtaking view of the entire Buckhorn Range to the east and a sprawling valley to the west. Ancient Ponderosa pines adorn the grounds in natural groupings and patches of graying snow cower in their shadows, their cause doomed without timely reinforcement. Well-ordered flowerbeds wait anxiously for the attention spring will bring them.

Passing through large entry doors of heavily varnished pine, Smokey sees the word 'Wingspread' carved into a matching plaque above the doors. He makes a mental note to ask about it later. He also notes that the house is receiving full-time attention. It is spotless and tastefully appointed with engaging Old West accessories. Even the Christmas tree appears to have been professionally decorated.

To Halbert, it seems a bit rustic for the wealthy owner and editor of a national magazine. Having escaped the D.C. slums, John's taste in all things now favors the more upscale and cosmopolitan. Still, there is something serene about the luxurious leather furniture arrayed before Carroll's oversized stone fireplace. Smokey wheels into a convenient spot between two sorrel-colored chairs.

With the timing of a seasoned hostess, Marissa Carroll, T. J.'s mother, enters from the kitchen, greets the visiting gentlemen and deftly lays a tray of hot chocolate and small cookies on a well-aged pine coffee table.

Marissa now shares the sprawling house with her son, having turned some space on the main floor into a cozy little apartment. More than eighty years old, maintaining her own home simply became a burden she did not wish to bear. Still, she enjoys keeping her son's place in fine order for the visitors who appear regularly whenever T. J. gets home. It is a good arrangement for both.

T. J. introduces the genteel matron of the house. John stands to shake her hand while Smokey thanks her sincerely for her thoughtfulness. T. J. then suggests that she sit and join them. This unexpected addition causes the visitors some visible discomfort. However, they quickly understand that it'll be two-on-two for this meeting, whether they like it or not. *Apparently, Mr. Carroll still listens to his mommy*, thinks Smokey, as he tries to suppress a wince.

The refreshments having been sampled, the host and hostess wait politely for their guests to begin. T. J. suspects that they're seeking some sort of endorsement from his publication, *On Balance*. *Wait*, he recalls, *wasn't there some news about Rappaport the other day?* Marissa senses a larger, more intriguing purpose for this unusual visit.

Seeing that the time for pleasantries has ended, Smokey leans forward, makes a point of looking straight into Mr. Carroll's eyes and begins. "Well sir, there's no reason to beat around the bush. From the editorials we've studied in that national magazine of yours, we believe you could support the platform of the Independent Party. The idea that unites us all is that it's high time we tried democracy in America. We've always been a republic, governed by representatives. But them representatives ain't being all that representative anymore. The system won't let 'em. So, the system has got to change. Now, we

believe that technology has reached a point where it's possible to let citizens make their own decisions, to give true democracy a try.

"We think it's time people got to vote directly on issues of national policy and have their votes stick. So, our platform is real simple; add a constitutional amendment to make that happen -- the twenty-ninth. But, we need a little help."

John Halbert takes over. "You've no doubt heard about Ira Rappaport dropping out of the presidential race. The timing is terrible. We were really gaining momentum. That's why we must have a replacement candidate, immediately. If we're going to keep our coalition together and stand any chance against the major parties, we've got to be led by a nationally known and respected figure. We all think you're the one."

Smokey takes the handoff and continues the drive. "Sir, we're going to make you the same offer ol' George Washington got back around 1775. What we're asking is that you drop everything else you're doing and take on the uphill fight of your life; leading a rag-tag bunch of zealots that are pushing a radical new idea against well-heeled professionals who want to keep things just the way they are. One helluva deal, ain't it?"

A grin slithers onto T. J.'s otherwise stoic face. He doesn't wish to respond with sarcasm, but the temptation is overwhelming. "I believe you gentlemen are looking for Mr. Quixote. He lives in the next valley over. I can give you his number if you like."

The four share a subdued chuckle, but the representatives of the Independent Party won't be so easily distracted or dismissed. John presses the argument.

"I know, sir. We're asking a great deal of you, and we've hit you with this cold. But will you at least let Smokey and me give you all the details of our proposal, before you throw us out?" John smiles as pleasantly as he knows how, hoping to somehow evoke a favorable response.

Carroll glances at his mother. She shrugs and replies, "Well, at least they're not selling vacuums." T. J. smiles and gestures for the visitors to proceed.

Halbert leans back and lets the chair absorb his full weight for the first time. The muscles in his neck and shoulders begin to loosen their grip on his spine.

The exhausted guests depart some two hours later, having been suitably grilled by both T. J. and Marissa on every aspect of their program and plan. Weston and Halbert perceive this to be a good sign. They expected to be shown the door within minutes. Instead, they are promised a decision within twenty-four hours. Too tired to drive safely back to Denver, they take rooms in a nearby motel.

Once the visitors are gone, T. J. Carroll dons an old leather flying jacket and walks out onto the spacious west deck to watch the sun excuse itself for the day. It had been warm for December, so the early sunset seems unnatural. He is lost in thought as Marissa, who had thrown on only a woolen shawl, approaches and softly takes his arm.

"Well, what do you make of that?" asks his mother as T. J. affectionately covers her hand with his to keep it warm.

"Christ," responds T. J. with a smirk, "you'd have to be nuts to sign on to that operation."

"Yes. I especially liked the part where you told them 'My mama didn't raise no fools'." Being nearly a foot shorter, Marissa hugs her son's shoulder as they share the quiet drama of a mountain sunset. The fiery lower rim of the sun touches a faraway ridge. She smoothly continues, "You're considering it, aren't you?"

T. J. glances down at Marissa with feigned shock. It's no use. She has a mother's gift for seeing through any pretense he might venture. "Yup."

"I figured as much," sighs Marissa. "It seems to be the Carroll's destiny to ride off and fight for the little guy, even when the cause is hopeless. I guess it's only natural you'd want to take on the Republicans *and* the Democrats -- both at the same time." She has him pegged. An enduring family history is now infringing on both thought and emotion.