

CHAPTER 1

THE GATHERING

Friday, October 11th

Fredericksburg, VA

T.G.I.F. Christine is ending a frustrating week at Rappahannock Realty. Twice she thought the five-bedroom colonial on Tidewater Trail had sold, and twice the buyers had backed out at the last moment. Three percent of the asking price would have been a nice little boost. The month is nearly half over now, and Christine has yet to close a deal. Hopefully, the transmission in her aging Buick will hold out a little longer.

As always, her body has left the office well before her mind. Driving the usual route, Chris admires the cute cream-colored Rambler with the green fence on Hamilton Street. That would sell in a heartbeat. Then there's the split-level on South Brooks Drive, where basic maintenance seems to be against the owner's religion. It's a real fixer-upper -- but a good candidate for a flip.

What Christine Whitcomb does not note, as she nears her townhome, is a navy-blue Tahoe with tinted windows parked about a block from her driveway. Inside the SUV, two people wait and record Whitcomb's 5:25 p.m. arrival.

Friday, October 11th

Sacramento, CA

Simultaneously, three time zones to the west, Cory Skaggs is focusing on a bug that has surfaced in an auditing program. It is 2:26 p.m.

After college, Cory had knocked on Silicon Valley doors until his knuckles and nerves were raw. Desperate to start paying off his student loans, Cory finally settled for a Systems Analyst job with the California State Comptroller's Office. That was five years ago.

Now the outgoing young Black man feels he has somehow joined the robotron bureaucrats who commute on autopilot each day from their standard three-bedroom ranch homes in the suburbs. It's not quite the cutting-edge computer career he had envisioned. Someday.

Cory's concentration is disrupted by the desk phone. The call is from his immediate supervisor, Jane Skoryski, whose office is only 30 feet away. Normally, Jane and Cory have an excellent relationship. She had been his mentor in the early days, and he sometimes thinks of her more as a big sister than as a boss. But the tone of her voice is now strained and strange.

"Cory, I need you to shut down your computer, gather all your personal belongings, and come to my office right away."

"Geez, Jane, what's up?"

"Just do it, Cory."

Skaggs' mind is racing as he complies with the unexplained order. He locates an empty box near the copy machine and lays the framed picture of his parents and his wedding photo carefully in the bottom. To this, he adds some personal files, the wall calendar he always got from the local hardware store, and anything else that didn't resemble state government property.

The shock is really setting in now. *What could I possibly have screwed up so badly that I'm being canned? And, how in hell am I going to explain this to Melissa?* As he leaves the cubicle, Cory decides to fasten his top shirt button and tighten his tie, the wearing of which is his one concession to state government dress codes.

Seeing two burly guys in dark suits waiting with Jane only fuels Cory's imagination. He's thinking; *Damn, is it so big the Feds want my ass?* Following a short exchange in Skoryski's office, in full view of all his curious co-workers, Mr. Skaggs and his box are escorted from the premises.

The office is unusually quiet for the rest of the day. The volume of digital communication, however, balloons as speculation on Cory's fate escalates from the plausible to the bizarre. Jane, of course, can tell them nothing -- yet.

Friday, October 11th

Trenton, NJ

Back on the east coast, Ms. Terry Slatkin is sitting in her usual booth at Billie's, a classic downtown diner in Trenton. Billie's is part of Slatkin's daily regimen. It's right on the way home.

Occasionally, if she is running early, Terry will also stop by in the morning and grab a quick raisin bagel with cream cheese. And, if Inge happens to see her coming, the bagel will pop out of the toaster just as Terry takes her favorite seat. These little events, so predictable, are cherished in Slatkin's chaotic world.

Though she left the office quite early (7:00 p.m. is the norm for aspiring law partners), her smartphone and notebook computer are on the table, and Terry is in full multi-tasking mode. The time is 5:35 p.m.

Terry thanks Max Weinstein, the Night Manager, for tending to her coffee cup. As Max finishes pouring, he notices the arrival of a man and a woman. In the entryway, they shake the rain from their nearly identical trench coats.

"Have a seat anywhere, folks," says Max as he returns to his post behind the cash register. They do not respond.

Instead, they walk directly to Terry's booth and stand just where they block Max's view of his loyal customer. Neither can he quite hear their conversation.

Max pretends to clean the countertop as he works his way closer. Too late. Terry is shutting down her electronic devices and starting to pack up her things.

The two non-customers step back to let Terry out of the booth. She glances at Max and nods as she heads for the lady's restroom.

Max looks back at the couple in the raincoats and asks: "Is there anything I can do for you folks?" The man responds that they are just waiting for Ms. Slatkin.

Once Terry returns from the restroom, she gathers her belongings, slips on her coat, and then approaches Max.

Slatkin says, "This should cover it, Billie," and slides a twenty across the counter.

As Max places a hand on the Jackson, he leans in and whispers, "Is everything all right, Miss Slatkin?"

Terry gives him a reassuring smile, places her hand on top of his, and taps her index finger twice. Then she and her escorts are gone.

Max watches as the trio climbs into a dark minivan and pulls away from the curb. He is still puzzled, and thinks to himself, *why did she call me Billie? Is Ms. Slatkin trying to alert me that something is not right? Still, she didn't seem upset or concerned.*

When he tries to pick up the money, he discovers one of Slatkin's business cards hidden beneath it. She has written a note on the back.

*Max, pls call Mr. Zellwig tomorrow &
tell him I've been selected. Thank you.
(202) 555-6390 x 112*

Now Max is even more confused. "Selected for what?" he says aloud. As requested, however, Max will make a phone call the next morning. He likes to look out for Terry.

In his mind, Ms. Slatkin represents the young, successful daughter that Inge never had the chance to become. Not that he's ashamed of his daughter. She's a fine girl, and the granddaughter she gave him is a source of immeasurable joy. It's just that Inge had so much potential, and then it was all forfeited for such a passing moment of pleasure.

Friday, October 11th

Site 27A

Within the space of an hour, four more citizens are extracted, along with some members of their immediate families; one each from South Dakota, Indiana, Arizona, and South Carolina. Within two hours, all seven packages are en route to a secure facility located forty-seven miles west of Washington, D. C.

The facility, which has no official name yet, is simply referred to as Site 27A. It being a government facility, one may not assume that there are twenty-six others or even that there is a 27B. Nevertheless, in a previous incarnation, this place had been an exclusive conference center and corporate retreat.

About two years ago, the General Services Administration (GSA) made the previous owners an offer they could not refuse. Actually, "offer" would be a polite term for the purchase agreement imposed by the GSA.

The rustic charm of 27A was meticulously maintained during the renovation. All the original buildings date from the 1940s and were adorned in

the twelve shades of red brick so common to Virginia. As structures were added later, they retained the prevailing Georgian architecture.

Once it became a federal complex, the interior of each building was remodeled extensively. Elaborate and nearly invisible security systems were installed along with modern wiring, plumbing, HVAC systems, and other amenities. The airstrip was upgraded too and then marked "restricted" on all aeronautical charts.

The sole purpose of Site 27A is to provide a secure workplace for members of the Caucus, now being gathered from across the nation. Three similar facilities had been, or were being, developed. These had been labeled in the press as Federal Election Commission (FEC) Research Centers. This will be the third time Site 27A is used.

The Caucus was born with the passage of the twenty-ninth amendment to the U. S. Constitution. The creation of this body was, perhaps, the most visionary, and therefore the most controversial, provision of that amendment. The current broad acceptance of Amendment Twenty-Nine (XXIX) by the general population is one of those subtle miracles that are never recognized as such until historians look back from some distant point in space-time.

Composed of seven volunteer Citizens, the prescribed mission of the Caucus is to identify national policies that should be brought before the public for review. Whatever issues are selected by the Caucus go on to a national referendum.

If the Citizenry endorses a proposed policy by a sufficient margin (two-thirds of participating voters), its decision is then binding upon the other three branches of government. The Legislative Branch will codify the policy decision, the Executive Branch will implement and enforce it, and the Judicial Branch will arbitrate disputes arising from it.

In essence, with passage of the twenty-ninth amendment, the Citizenry had become, at long last, the fourth active branch of the federal government. It would have the special responsibility of formulating national policy on issues of general concern. The separation of law-making from policy formulation was the particular genius of the amendment. Though the legislative, executive, and judicial branches could still develop policy, they would be restricted to areas where the Citizenry might be silent or had not yet provided guidance.

America had thus been transformed. Establishing the Citizenry as the fourth and highest branch of government was nothing short of revolutionary. Though binding referenda had been used in the European Union for some time, American citizens had never been allowed such authority, until they were asked to vote on passage of the twenty-ninth amendment. Now, the U.S.A. has taken democracy to its next logical stage of evolution. America is once again a model of governance that other nations are studying and aspiring to emulate.

This is not to imply that peace reigns supreme over the land. There are many factions within the Washington, D.C. Beltway (and across the country) who lost their privileged status because of the twenty-ninth amendment. They have labeled this addition "unconstitutional," filed suit in Federal court, fought in Congress for its repeal, and have even called for the impeachment of sitting U. S. President, T. J. Carroll, the amendment's leading advocate.

Unfortunately for these dissenting factions, understanding and support are growing rapidly for the new system. In the approximately two years since inception, eight Caucus groups have met and deliberated. Their proposals have been put before the public as National Policy Referenda. Some have been rejected. Others gained approval and are now in various stages of implementation. It is becoming increasingly difficult for the old guard to argue that the common citizen is not prepared for, or deserving of, these new responsibilities.

Footnote: Shortly after passage of the twenty-ninth amendment, President Carroll modified the charter of the Federal Election Commission to give it the added responsibility of managing all aspects of the referendum process.

Friday, October 11th

Fredericksburg, VA

The Whitcomb family extraction in Virginia is typical and routine. Christine, a real estate agent for the past several years, has barely gotten her shoes off when the doorbell chimes. With a moan, she gets back to her feet, shuffles to the front entrance, and opens the door, just a crack.

She sees a dark SUV parked behind her car. A man and woman in prim business suits stand before her. Christine is pretty sure these are not your typical door-to-door salespeople. Then they both display some sort of identification badge.

"Mrs. Christine Whitcomb?" asks the woman in a tone rather more pleasant than expected.

"Yes."

"Good afternoon," continues the man. "We're from the Federal Election Commission in Washington, D. C. I am Mr. Cannon. This is Mrs. Lawrence. May we come in?"

Christine cautiously opens the screen door and motions for them to enter. Then she shows them to the living room. Out of deference to her visitors, she slips her work shoes back on.

"Have a seat. May I ask what this is about? Did my last ballot have a hanging chad or something?"

"You have a lovely home," responds Mrs. Lawrence, obviously avoiding the question and the attempted humor.

Cannon interjects, "Is your daughter home, ma'am?" It's a rhetorical question. They know she arrived seventy-five minutes earlier. "We really need to speak to both of you."

"Well, all right. I'll get her." Now Chris is really getting tense.

Knocking on Jennifer's door, Christine tells her daughter to come out to the living room.

Jennifer protests, "I'm talking to Cheryl. Can't it wait?"

Christine then employs her mother voice. "No, Jenn. I need you out here right away. We have visitors."

Jennifer responds with a loud groan and then says, "Alright. I'll be out in a minute." The debriefing on Cheryl's encounter with Mike Sims in the hallway outside the lunchroom will have to be continued later.

Jennifer finally shuffles into the room and gives a muffled "Hello" to the strangers, before plopping onto the well-padded arm of her mother's chair.

Christine then presses the question. "Okay, we're both here. So, what's going on?"

Mrs. Lawrence finally answers. "Well, Mrs. Whitcomb, do you remember that early last year, you responded to a call for volunteers to serve on a new agency of government called the Caucus?" Christine nods her head.

"And before you signed up, you were provided information concerning the process, the burdens it might impose on you and your family, and the benefits of serving. Correct?"

"Yes, I recall that," responds Christine cautiously.

"Well -- you're on," says Cannon, now smiling broadly.

Christine is shocked. She had figured the odds of getting picked for the Caucus at one in several million -- only slightly better than buying the winning lottery ticket at the Quick Mart, the weekly purchase of which is, unfortunately, a key element in the Whitcomb's long-range financial plan. "Really? I've been selected?"

"You have indeed," replies Lawrence. "Over thirteen million folks have signed up so far, but the computer has pulled your name out of its virtual hat."

"Wow -- that's incredible!" exclaims Christine, as she reaches out to hug her daughter. "But I doubt if I can leave work for a few days. I've got a major sale that I'm working on."

Cannon looks at his watch and then replies, "The head of your real estate office has just been notified that you will be on a leave of absence and that your commission on any closings you were working on will be guaranteed."

"But Mom, I've got some big exams next week," complains Jennifer. "I can't miss that."

"You won't," responds Mrs. Lawrence. "Some colleagues of ours visited your school shortly after you were dismissed. We'll assign a tutor for the duration of your stay at the facility, and that tutor will administer all your usual homework and tests. But your principal does want a full report of your experiences when you return."

"Oh great," says Jennifer with transparent sarcasm.

"And how long would we be away?" asks Christine.

"No more than sixty days -- usually much less." Jennifer groans and then slumps into a nearby chair of her own.

Christine asks, "What about the house?"

"We provide full maintenance and security services while you're away. You don't have to worry about a thing."

"Oh yes, I do," responds Christine with a measure of alarm. "I've got to pay the mortgage on this mansion."

Lawrence responds again. "Not a concern. That'll be taken care of too."
The group sits in silence for a moment.
"When?" asks Mrs. Whitcomb as she looks at her daughter.
"Now," says Mr. Cannon.

In making arrangements for the sudden absence of seven U. S. citizens and their families, the Federal Election Commission (FEC) determined that it would be pointless to try to obscure the fact that they are slated for duty on the Caucus. There are just too many people involved in providing administrative and logistical support to these families during their time away.

The FEC is, however, extremely careful about revealing the site of the Caucus meeting to anyone who has no need to know. This rule applies even to elected officials at the highest levels of government. The nightmare scenario for the FEC would be for the media to learn about the site and set up camp there for the duration of the session.

Friday, October 11th

Site 27A

Each of the Caucus members arrives by small jet, and their flights are timed to ensure that the landings are well after dark. Coming from Fredericksburg, the Whitcomb's trip should have been quite short. However, the aircraft stayed aloft for over three hours. This is part of the effort to keep the location of Caucus meetings secret, even from those participating.

It's nearly 10 p.m. The van that picked the Whitcomb's up at the tiny rural airport passes through a security gate and soon pulls up to a quaint little house surrounded by several ancient oak trees. Lawrence and Cannon escort the Whitcomb's to the front door, where they are met by Mrs. Selfridge, the assigned Residential Assistant.

Mrs. Selfridge reminds Christine of her grandmother, who had passed when young Chrissy was only fourteen. In the housekeeper's welcoming presence, Christine Whitcomb senses a joy akin to that of a grandmother greeting the grandchild who visits too infrequently.

"Welcome to the James Madison Cottage," says Mrs. Selfridge with a hint of pride in her voice. She takes some of their smaller bags and pleasantly asks about their flight as she leads them inside.

Lawrence explains, "Mrs. Selfridge will be your Residential Assistant -- R.A., for short. She resides in the house and will be available to you at any time of the day or night. Anything you need, she will try to arrange."

"Well, that sounds like a nice change," says Christine cheerily.

Once all the luggage is in the house, Lawrence and Cannon excuse themselves, saying that one of them will be back in the morning to escort Mrs.

Whitcomb to the main building. Mrs. Selfridge then gives the new tenants a short tour of their living quarters.

Christine estimates that Selfridge is in her sixties. She seems, however, to have the energy of a much younger woman. Slightly shorter than Christine, but a bit taller than Jennifer, both take an instant liking to the matronly lady with reading glasses hanging below her neck so she can readily find them as needed.

The Residential Assistant explains that there are seven cottages, all named for Founding Fathers, and ranging from two to four bedrooms, not counting the R.A.'s rooms. The Madison Cottage is a three-bedroom model. That gives the ladies some choice of bedrooms. There is also a modern kitchen, a formal dining area, and a generous living room where one corner is reserved for a large desk, complete with a computer and printer.

Throughout the tour, Christine is, by habit, evaluating features of the house and calculating the market value, as if it were located in Fredericksburg. There are lovely old wooden floors in the common areas, but the rest of the furnishings, though tasteful, seem like they were items offered at bulk discount by a furniture outlet. Nevertheless, the Madison Cottage is a significant upgrade from their own weather-beaten townhouse.

Christine and Jennifer adjourn to their selected rooms to unpack and get prepared for bed. When they emerge in their pajamas and robes about an hour later, Mrs. Selfridge has a bedtime snack of milk and homemade cookies ready on the coffee table in front of the sofa. It's as if she had read their minds.

"Well, it's going to be nice having my very own bathroom while we're here," says Jennifer as she settles onto the couch.

"And I'm really going to enjoy this R.A. thing," adds her mom. "Hopefully, you'll pick up some pointers on how to be a better 'residential assistant' when we get back home."

"Oh, Mom," says Jennifer with a tone of teenage exasperation. They each then go for a cookie and begin dunking it in the milk. Just like home.

"I guess we're two pretty lucky people to be here. We better make the most of it," admonishes Christine.

Jennifer grunts her agreement.

"No, really," says Christine. "Do you realize that only about sixty people in all the United States, and in all our history, have had a chance to be part of a Caucus?"

"Fat lot of good that does me," responds Jennifer with a hint of anger. "I'm missing out on a lot of important stuff."

"More important stuff than playing a part in the government of our country?"

"That's only you, Mom. I'm just a prisoner here till you finish your work, whatever that is."

Christine ponders her daughter's attitude and is soon able to understand this alternate view of the situation. She quickly develops a plan for painting a brighter picture.

"I don't think you are seeing the positives here, Jenn. Why, when you get back to school, you're going to be a rock star. Everyone is going to want to be

your best friend. It wouldn't surprise me at all if that Patrick Rahlings finally takes notice of you."

Jennifer gasps. "You're not supposed to know about that! How did you find out I liked him?"

"Oh, we moms have our social networks too, ya know."

"Very funny. I guess I'll never have any privacy until I go off to college in a couple years. I can't wait."

Mother and daughter repeat their dunking ritual until the plate of cookies is empty, and the milk remaining in their cups is full of soggy crumbs. The cups are drained with a satisfying slurp. Then, it's time to test their new beds.