

Brainiacs of Washington
Washington at the End of the Day Series – Book 3

PUBLISHED BY:
Grover Flintridge
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Dedication:

Tip o' the fedora to a Georgia cracker who sank with the Titanic and who suggested the timeless political skullduggery theme for this Washington At The End Of The Day epic. Thank you Jacques Futrelle. May you RIP.

In the opinion of some citizens of the United States who are in a position to know that there is apt to be a shortage of seeds for garden planting next spring. There was a great demand this year and will be a larger demand next. *Many of our seeds are imported* and war in Europe has cut down the supply of these seeds.

Dresden Enterprise and Sharon Tribune - August 24, 1917

Dramatis Personae (By order of appearance)

Timothy E. McClane – President United States

Burlington Hayes – Agent, Secret Service

Aurora/ Viola Spumani – The foreign agent

Antonio Georgi – Aurora's aide

Dawson 'Pops' Phillips – White House Chief of Staff

Dillard Cornichon – NSC Staffer

Viola "Doris" Duquesne – Speaker of the House

Lomax Black – Washington billionaire and archfoe to the president

Alexi – Black's top man and sweetheart

Hector Lopez – Contract killer from Chicago

Donovan Criester – Director National Intelligence

Monday

President Timothy E. McClane had taken to beginning his day by reading a summary of odd news, jokes, and the latest graphic art renderings that pertained strictly to himself. It was prepared overnight by various staff members on rotation and delivered to his laptop which sat charging by his bedside. When he opened it up... it was there. He had no idea how they did that for he barely knew how to operate the thing beyond that and his Firefox browser and its half dozen bookmarks set to carry him to his favorite places.

It was 4:30 AM and he was quite rested. He had gone to bed earlier than usual a couple of hours before. A couple of feet away on his extra wide king size bed First Lady Betty still slumbered, purring. Nothing woke her up before 6:30 in the morning.

The first bit informed him that he was set to fire his Secretary of State, Gordon Fane. That was news. The next was a piece where a first year congressman said that billionaires in his party should not be allowed to exist. Supposing that meant that he was being called upon to confiscate their money he read the full article and learned that no, the congressman was calling for them to actually be eliminated. The piece ended with the politician calling him a useless jerk and some other things.

Generally he only scanned the articles. He had a trick. He most relished the forum comments. Disallowing the trolls and fanatics, often hidden in the copious rants were some true gems of wisdom. More than that, the comments were the true gauges of the temperature of his voters and enemies alike. Whereas others in his rare air sphere had only a handful of muckraking duplicitous salrymen pundit writers, he had thousands of ardent opinionated critics and supporters.

RatBastard: *“McClane has given me a BIG ASS headache with this GREAT economy. I have added FOUR new taxpayers to the rolls and had to buy two Vans. THIS though is a headache I can live with.!!”*

He chuckled at a spectacular depiction of himself as John Wayne in the movie *Red River* driving a herd of cattle with faces from members of both political parties. He couldn't draw a round circle. He was always envious of the ingenuity of his fans. He particularly admired the cross-eyed depiction of House Speaker Doris Duquesne. He was often accused of saying what he really thought, but he knew that wasn't true. For instance he could never publicly recognize the artist for his excellent work. That would be going a moo too far. Further down the reading list he got into the really nasty stuff, which caused his muscles to tense. This was his morning aerobics.

After his workout he pushed a button on the console beside the bed and went for his morning constitutional and ablutions. In 10 minutes he was out in his monogrammed fuzzy blue bath coat, out into the next room but one where he found his clothes neatly laid out on the chair by the breakfast table. Breakfast this morning consisted of juice, cold water, three eggs over easy, a stack of Eggster Waffles, real taste tested maple syrup, two east coast crab cakes, and two pieces of toast with a generous helping of grape jelly made right in the White House kitchen. 10 minutes later he walked out dressed and ready to get his hair done.

It wasn't all that cold for an early March morning, and the wind light for a change. With the sun just peeking, Secret Service agent Burlington Hayes takes his post at a well padded metal glider behind the White House. Conservatively dressed in a well tended three piece suit that perfectly fits his burly 6'2'' well muscled frame he wipes away the morning dew with his white

handkerchief and sits. An old but spry kitchen helper dressed in starched white, chef's hat included, appears from somewhere with a monogrammed cup of coffee on a monogrammed saucer. Hayes nods at him, which causes the man to beam gratitude before going back the way he came.

Blowing on the coffee, a perk of his job, he looks at the square patch before him. The First Lady's garden, all neatly wrapped in 6 mil plastic. He counts the plants, keenly noting their appearance. 12 stalks of table corn. Four well staked indeterminate tomatoes. Three each cowhorn peppers and bell peppers. Four squash plants. Not so much now, but with care, the postage stamp garden promises good eating later. He notes well that the small electric heater is operating efficiently, an orange drop cord mysteriously plugged into the ground some feet away.

Tilting his head he looks for the tell tale movement of little feet on limbs of the stately nearby oaks. It's the destroying, fat, disgustingly overfed squirrels that is the danger to the fledgling First Lady's prize garden. Seeing nothing...yet... he once again blows on his sterling cup of coffee.

Elsewhere at Dulles, a well proportioned, thin, dark haired woman wearing a white blouse and neatly pressed dark pants, small suitcase on wheels in tow hails a taxi. She gives the driver the address to a small townhouse in the Del Ray suburb in Alexandria. He gets a whiff of her perfume, lightly mixed with sweat. The last place he'd ever be caught dead in was one of those flying cracker boxes, but it pays his ticket so he never complains. The lady doesn't want to make small talk and that's just fine with him.

Paying the cabbie, she exits the vehicle, leaning back in to retrieve her suitcase. The driver makes no effort to help. Shaking her head slightly, she walks up the short sidewalk as the car drives off. At the door, per her instructions she lifts the welcome mat to get the key. Unlocking the door she enters, closing the door behind. Instantly she is on guard. Leaving the suitcase she tiptoes to the next room, peeking around the corner to reveal a man smoking a cigarette, watching an old black and white movie on the television.

"Who are you?" she challenges.

Instantly the man, skinny, in his early 20's, slacks, expensive white shirt, and loafers with no socks bounds out of the chair frightened as a rabbit.

"Antonio. Georgi," he stammers. "And you are?"

"I am Aurora. Now get out!" she says sharply. "And empty that stinking ashtray well away from this house!"

"Si signora!" he yelled, scooping up the cola can he was using for his butts. "Si! Immediatamente!"

Quickly opening the front and back doors she stood on the back steps fanning her face with her left hand. She spoke to the sky, "Now I will need a bath!"

An angry woman, thought Antonio standing in the tiny back yard holding the can, glancing around for somewhere to bury it.

At 7AM the president was sitting in the Oval Office with his back to the desk looking out the window. A lawn man was running back and forth on an expensive looking washed and polished pro diesel zero turn mower with bagger. McClane was fascinated, particularly with the padded roll bar. He was thinking it would be fun to cut the grass for a change, not that he ever had.

Every morning, rain, snow, or shine, a lawn man (there were a score of them) would mow the never growing grass. Every morning when he could McClane would watch. This morning he thought he saw a squirrel tightly clutching onto a limb taking it all in as well, the man below furiously driving in circles.

Knock knock. "Mr. President, good morning." said Dawson 'Pops' Phillips, his ever present non monogrammed Styrofoam cup of coffee in his left hand, a thick binder of papers under his left arm.

"Pops!" drawled McClane, as usual, genuinely pleased. Pops was one of the few guys that didn't need an NDA. A regular confidant. "What's up today Pops?" asked McClane smiling broadly. "What ya got for the old man?"

Now it was Pops turn to grin. He was eleven years his elder, and the president was 66 in his third year of the trying job, and he was feeling every year of it while his boss seemed like he kept getting younger.

"We have a few items on the agenda," he said, dragging one chair close to the other, dropping his binder with a heavy plop. "But before we get onto it, I got a man who has been sitting outside on a pin since a little before six this morning, the log shows. He told me he wanted to be first in and I'm darned if I want to disappoint him."

"Who is it?" asked McClane intrigued.

"It would be one Dill Cornichon, a NSC advisor," replied Pops. "And he's loaded for bear."

"Old sour dill pickle," said McClane with humor. Darkening, "Is it anything serious?"

"He thinks so. I'll let him explain it to you."

McClane leaned forward, arms on his mostly unpapered desk. "Send him on in, and you sit with us. Do we trust him?"

Normally it would have been an odd question, since he signed off on the hire, but with all the treachery by former nominees behind him it only made sense to ask. He hadn't seen him in a couple of weeks. And the NSC was still rife with suspected snitches beholden to the last regime.

"Ahhh, I still don't think he's the problem, but it won't hurt to re-light that fire to run off what's left of the holdovers with his boss, Harold Engless. Might tell him to mention that to Engless while he's in here."

McClane nodded and grunted, motioning to the door.

Pops went to the door. Sticking his head out he said a little louder than necessary, "Cornichon..." Just like in the doctor's office. He loved to do that.

Dillard Cornichon, a somewhat frazzled young man in his mid-twenties, slightly wrinkled suit walked in, briefcase in hand.

"Siddown." said McClane motioning to the empty chair in front of the desk, his features neutral. Pops drifted over to the side of the room to sit on the sofa.

"How you coming, moving the older fellows into different slots and out of the NSC?" asked the president, all business?

Cornichon wasn't prepared for that. He had been practicing how the meeting would go since before daybreak and this wasn't in his talking points.

"Ummm, coming right along," he said, playing for time.

“Umm hmm,” said the president through his nose. “Looking for good reports Dill, and less leaks. Know what I mean?”

Cornichon broke out into a sweat, beads forming on his forehead underneath his expensive follicle implants. “Uh, I know exactly what you mean sir. Coming right along. Coming along..”

“Umm hmm,” said McClane nodding knowingly. “What brings you this morning? Pops says you got something big cooking.”

Finally! On script now. “Mr President. My department just got word yesterday that there is a movement afoot to deny seed shipments. Foreign countries. Won’t ship seeds. Anymore.”

He waited for a reaction, too long. This wasn’t going well.

The president, his head cocked to one side, attempting to process said, “So?”

“Well,” stammered Cornichon, “I’m no farmer. Just poke a seed in the ground and add a little water to it and it grows is all I know. But some of the fellows are and they say it could be bad news.”

McClane shrugged his shoulders ever so slightly, giving him the look...

“What I’m saying is that we get a lot of seed and plants and stuff from elsewhere. If certain countries held them up, it could spell bad news here. Starvation maybe. Higher prices anyway. Certainly in time. We depend an awful lot on other countries, more than we should.”

“For tomato seed?” asked the president, suddenly thinking about his wife’s little garden.

“We’d have to run a study on that,” said Cornichon meaningfully. “And we are running a study on it Mr. President!” He was gaining confidence now. “But suffice to say that a very quick perusal on Google indicates that we import an awful lot of seed. So it could be bad.”

“Give me specifics,” said the president.

“Specifically, we’re looking at the Netherlands, Colombia, Germany, Italy, Ecuador, Kenya, Belgium, Denmark, and Canada as being part of this cabal.”

“Cabal, Canada?” repeated the president incredulously.

“And there is more. Possibly the EU and China as well.”

“But why in heavens on earth would Canada of all places want to short us on seeds? What have they got that we don’t have?”

“Hemp for one thing Mr. President,” said Cornichon now on firm ground. “Weed. Dope. Our marijuana farmers, just ramping up now would certainly be put into a bind. And Valentines Day. A great many of the flowers that week are shipped into the country from all over. I could go on...”

Terrorism, plots against the government, hell, lost atomic bombs. That was something the president could wrap his mind around...but flowers?

Cornichon sensing that his presentation was having an effect, he calmed down a bit. After all he was not afraid of the president...per se.

“I know I know Mr. President,” he said. “We could hardly fathom it ourselves.” He rolled his eyes. “The first we heard of it was this past Friday, late. Word filtered in that generally something was going on. Came from our source at our embassy in the Netherlands.”

“From Ambassador Reid?”

“Erruh no sir. One of our assets. We have them all over, as I’m sure you know.” (It was actually the brother-in-law of a line NSC employee, a lucky break, and he had no intention of letting on unless directly pressed.)

“It was just a rumor at that point and with no other information we really had nothing to pursue on the matter. But over the weekend Ambassador Maggerson in Italy sent the list of countries I just mentioned to the State Department.”

“How come I’m not hearing this from State then?”

“You’d have to ask *them* sir.” (Of course, human nature being what it is, Cornichon was somewhat gleeful at the moment that he was not working for State.)

“Well, how did you hear about it from State then?”

“We have a man in....”

President McClane shot Pops a withering glance. “Ok ok. I don’t even want to know at this point.”

Cornichon with a well practiced grace reached down to open his briefcase which was in his lap. Snick snick. Retrieving the top sheet of paper he leaned forward to hand it to the president. “Sir, I failed to mention the other possible signatory. It’s at the bottom of the list.”

McClane looked up from the paper, frowning at Cornichon. Glancing back down to the bottom the last name on the list swam into sight. California!

McClane put the paper down and leaned back into his well padded chair. “Tell you what Cornichon. Let’s keep it in house for now. Just between you and your guys. Top secret and all that. Keep working on it and stay in touch with Pops. Let me know what you hear. And work with whoever I send to you.”

Cornichon was fairly vibrating with joy as Pops led him to the door, closing it.

McClane shook his head in disbelief. “Well did you ever hear of anything like that?”

“Puzzling alright,” said Pops.

“And another thing, why aren’t we hearing this from dill pickle’s boss, Harold Engless. Where’s he?”

Pops glanced up at the ceiling. “He’s having a baby.”

“Personally?” asked the president incredulously.

“No no, sir,” said Pops. “His wife is having the baby. He asked for that new four to six week leave thing congress just voted in strictly for governmental employees. He’ll be back most any week now. Probably.”

McClane’s eyes narrowed. “Tell you what. It’s international. Mostly. Put Criester over at National Intelligence on it. See what he can dig up.”

“Will do,” said Pops moving toward the door.

“Wait a minute,” said the president. “You forgetting about the schedule?”

“Oh,” said Pops, stopping short. “About to walk off without my briefcase anyway.”

Walking back to the chair he thumbed through his binder (which he called a briefcase) producing a sheet. “Let’s see. 9AM you wanted to speak to Premier Mstislav Utkin over that issue with the gas pipeline. The call will be waiting for you and the paperwork from State will be on your desk. The secretaries of State and Energy will be present with you. A dozen *trusted* transcribers will also be on the line. 11AM, el presidente of Peru...”

McClane picked up the list Cornichon had left for him and glanced at it. “He’s not on the cabal list. That’s good.”

“Noon sharp lunch with the VP. 1 to 2 personal time with the First Lady. 3:30, nope, 3, chopper to Andrews, and 3:30 wheels up for the rally in Colorado. Wheels down at 6:32 their time. Rally at 7 but knowing you it’ll be 7:30, which is roughly 5:30 local here. Motorcade back to the airport. Make it 10PM local, 8 here. Back here by 11. Then you’re free to watch reruns or whatever you do when you’re not busy. That is unless you got something different in mind.”

“No no. I’ll catch up on my TV.”

Pops nodded and turned away, this time with his binder in hand, then catching a thought. “Little birdy told me that Doris is planning to unveil her latest impeachment later today sometime.”

McClane hmmpfed. “What is it this time? 5th? 6th?”

Pops thought for a few seconds. “No, I believe this one is the 9th.”

McClane nodded. He didn’t even ask what the excuse was this time and he truly didn’t care.

Later that morning while the president was in conference with the Russian, Premier Utkin, the Speaker of the House Viola “Doris” Duquesne was in conference with a half dozen staff

members, three top senators of her party and Tabriq Harritz of the Important News Network (INN).

Duquesne, an older dyed coffee blonde lady with a great deal of cosmetic surgery behind her was a slight built woman with a nasty disposition who ruled by fear. A smile from her often curdled the cream in the omnipresent Styrofoam coffee cups of her opponents. In an era of dental implants she was reputed to have a mouthful of false teeth, but it was unproven, though an open issue at some betting websites in Ireland.

Meeting in her well appointed office, the theatrical pasted smiles all around locked down, her team stood or lounged about looking for all the world like a pack of hungry wolves.

“So, Madam,” intoned Harritz in his best TV voice, “A source tells me that you are planning to impeach the president. Can you confirm this and what for?”

“A source?” she giggled, her smile widening ever so slightly. “Who is your source Tabriq?”

Faithfully, “You know Madam Speaker that a newsperson never reveals sources. It would be unethical.”

The Speaker, sitting behind her neat desk leaned forward on bony elbows, the smile foremost. “Did you learn that line in school son?”

Tabriq frowned.

“So who’s your source?”

With but the briefest pause, “One of your lawyers, Fred Chappleman.”

“Ah,” said the Speaker leaning back into her well padded chair. Motioning to an aide she slid her finger across her throat. He nodded, quickly exiting the meeting. The other aides stood there motionless, their faces blanched white. The representatives all but leered, the scent of blood in their flaring nostrils.

“Well, now that we have that out of the way I believe you were going to work with us for the next impeachment. Is that correct Mr. Harritz?”

“Absolutely Madam Speaker! The chairman of INN has authorized me to offer you every assistance.”

The Speaker gathered herself, rubbing her thin hands together. “We haven’t quite made up our minds what we’ll impeach him for this time. But of course this time he *will* be impeached. You can tell your viewers that Mr. Harritz.”

Harritz was confused. “But what has he done that I may...” He ran out of words.

“We’ll let you know.”

Harritz had his lead for the evening. The president to be impeached. He’d just have to wing the rest, talk to a few more sources (He’d call his brother-in-law at the gas station), and offer speculation to make up for facts. That he could do.

Duquesne smiled so brilliantly that her perfectly white teeth stood out boldly, eyes a twinkle. “Now I know you have your news to write up or whatever it is that you do. We’ll be watching this evening.” She batted her eyes which was the signal for him to leave. And he did. Gratefully.

Meanwhile somewhere on the outskirts of D.C. at the fabulous Estate Bramble the second most powerful man on earth, Lomax Black, was nibbling at his breakfast, earthy slices of Brie cheese on rye from a small farm near Seine-et-Marne, France. He drank from a chilled glass of goat's milk from the same farm. Frankly he despised his meal, but it was said to be suave and continental, so he persisted.

Sitting safely away from the goat's milk was the latest copy of the shiny silver ESCOM laptop, tricked out to the cost of \$63,000 dollars, one of several around the mansion. A proprietary one of a kind build, Black owned the secretive supposedly defunct German company. Slowly the news content on his favorite online news sites scrolled by, flipping from one article to the next, then the next website to continue. He knew what he was reading wasn't actual news. Most of it was content he controlled in one way or the other, most of it dedicated to ousting the current president.

His ever present cell phone beeped. Shoving his miserable breakfast away he glanced at the ID. It was his man and lover Alexi. Unsurprising since he alone had the number.

Alexi: "A little birdy by the name of D(insworthy) just got in touch. He said he just got wind of a plot by a whole raft of nations to stop exporting seeds to the United States."

Black brushed at his non-existent hair on top of his almost cartoonishly large head sitting on his scrawny neck. He said, "Unauthorized. But no matter, so what?"

"So," replied Alexi a bit testily, "One of the signatories will be Canada. He said all he knew was Canada and China and more unspecified Latin American countries."

Black's eyes narrowed, "Canada would not do. It mustn't be on the list. No."

"I know sweetheart," said the voice on the other end. "Our U.S. marijuana operations are in the critical startup phase now and Canada is our main supplier of quality weed seed. A lack thereof could put the whole enterprise off for another year. We need that hemp now! The convention is practically just around the corner and we need that legal hemp to keep the delegates in our corner."

"Well," said Black testily, "We always did have the corner on drugs for the convention. I still think the risk would be acceptable to bring in the drugs from our old sources down south and from Afghanistan."

"No can do anymore," replied Alexi sympathetically. "Not with that damned McClane in office. I don't trust him any further than I can throw the Hoover dam. He's sneaky. We might get caught and I just don't know how I would explain it."

Black growled. "Where are you now?"

"Two, refueling. We set down with a conservation permit supplied by Japan. Officially we're transporting global weather change equipment to mid ocean volcanoes or some such garbage."

“There are about a million mid ocean airports you could have stopped at. Why did you choose Midway?” He already knew the answer.

“Why darling,” cooed Alexi. “Just because I can. You want your old sweetie to have fun don’t you?”

“You rascal. Just wait until I get you home,” trilled Black, his voice rising several octaves. Phone kisses and he hung up. The rest of the discussion could wait. He knew Alexi was already working on the problem.

A little after 4PM the president called Pops Phillips from the plane to go over the day's events since he had seen him last. Several topics down the line he asked about the seed affair.

Pops closed his eyes tightly. "I ran it around the usual places and the best I could get out of anyone was that they'd study it. Nobody will do a thing these days without the direct say-so from you and I can't blame 'em."

"Well I'm not there at the moment," said the president with a modicum of frustration.

"That's the way it stands. Nobody wants to take direct responsibility as long as they can lay it off on some other department. Well except for Matt Gregersen over at Energy. He said he'd be happy to look into it."

"You went to Matt with it?" asked the president incredulously.

"No, no I didn't," said Pops. "He was hanging around the cafeteria at our table while I was talking to Landon at Interior. I figured he was into biology. Maybe he could do something about it. So Matt chirped up and said he'd love to work on it."

"What can he do? Count the tree rings? I like Matt, a lot, but he's no sleuth."

"I guess he would like to be. Anyway I told him I'd get back to him about it."

"You're not going to get back with him about it?"

"No, of course not."

After a brief pause. "Supper is coming. I guess they are already working on Mountain Time. Tell you what. Put Burlington Hayes on it. He knows about plants."

"The tomato watcher?"

"That's the guy." Whispering, "It's disgraceful what the First Lady put him up to. Tell him he's got carte blanche with whatever he needs from the Secret Service. Tell him I said so."

"Will do," said Pops.

Click.

Much later in the evening after speaking to a packed house in Denver, somewhere over Missouri the president dialed up the podcast of the Fat Burtram Crosby radio show. Within the first five minutes he was steaming as he listened to a clip of Ronson Poole the Leader of the Senate agreeing with Darlette Jennings on ENBS (Electronic News Broadcasting Service). Getting sassy over his India trade program. Taking her rotten side over his new cotton imports policy! One of these days, he vowed, he'd fix him but good. Only, just now he needed his support.

He listened to the show alternately chuckling and grinding his teeth all the way back to D.C.

On his desk he had a dozen requests for time from the news hacks bouncing around in the back plane tail section. With pleasure he swept them into his immaculate gold rimmed bolted down trash can.

Tuesday

A few minutes after 9AM the taxi dropped Viola Spumani off at the Ambasciata d'Italia, the Italian Embassy on Whitehaven. An obscure white brick building, it looked more like an Italiano mountain condo than an embassy from the outside. Confidently gaining entry, the spacious interior was well comforted and bright from the beautiful skylight on the high ceiling. She strode up to the desk and leaned over to speak quietly to the receptionist. "I have urgent business with Ambassador Figolini."

She knew what it looked like, and she knew what the woman on the other side of the window thought it looked like. "Do whatever it is that you do but I instruct you to say one word to him. Aurora."

The receptionist looked askance but dutifully picked up the phone and made the call. In a few moments a tall, smartly dressed young man, obviously Italian strolled up smiling. "Signora, if you will accompany me to the elevator..."

Once the door closed he apologized in Italian, and still smiling quickly patted her down, from her bra to her panties. "You will forgive me," he began. "It is for the safety of all."

Eyes flashing, fingers curling reflexively she replied, "Si, but if you do not wipe that smile off your face I will do it for you."

Stone faced he led her past the office receptionist directly into the ambassador's office.

Figolini was a wiry middle aged man with a pockmarked face, the result of a serious acne infection in his youth. The dark bags under his eyes were the result of a heavy workload with an even heavier drinking regime. He sat for a moment studying her top to bottom. She was wearing a red dress with a white collar, but he wasn't interested in that. He always looked his visitors over carefully for bulges where there should be none. He was a very careful man, though he shouldn't have been. No one cared enough about the Italian ambassador to America to do him harm.

He motioned to the young man with an uplifted finger on his limp wrist and he departed quickly.

"Aurora," he said to the still standing woman.

"Do you not offer a chair to your guest?" she inquired tersely.

"Si si," he said without rising. "Sit down and be welcome." He was all too familiar with these impatient Italian women. Quick to anger. Quick to love. He held no illusions about the latter.

"I want you to give a reception Thursday evening. Invite the signatories and more besides. I wish to speak to all before the signing Saturday evening. Quietly of course. I'll simply be another guest. Your niece perhaps, from the old country."

Ambassador Figolini nodded. "It can be arranged, si. Of course, on such short notice..."

"I think they will all be here," she said shortly. "Do your best Ambassador. Remember that all must be party or the compact fails. Is morto. You understand?"

"I understand," he said ingratiatingly. "And all will be back here for the signing Saturday at what time?"

Aurora, who had been tilted forward, leaned back, crossing her well tanned legs. "It will *not* be *here* Ambassador."

"Then where? He asked, perplexed?"

Burlington Hayes had only received his assignment overnight. He was an older man, nearing the big five oh and he had been in the Secret Service since his early 20's just out of military service. Still lean and well muscled, in good shape with a mind like a steel trap, many years of practicing for the unthinkable behind him had drained him though it did not show. His shavetail, age challenged snitty little boss Dodd Thompkins who worked directly under the director Todd Apsell quickly offered him up to the First Lady for garden patrol.

He could have taken it as a slight, which it clearly was, and with a single word to Apsell he would have still been in the field. But instead he used it as an excuse for a rare vacation. A chance to uncoil. Had his immediate superior Thompkins known his frame of mind he would have been displeased indeed and this pleased Hayes deliciously.

Using his new power the first thing that morning he had contacted Deke Manton with the FBI to request an emergency stakeout of the embassies noted in his slim paperwork that were the likely signers of the compact.

Manton, who was well aware of the situation thanks to Pops Phillips informed him broadly that the embassies were already staked out. Probably so since 1942 or so.

"That's fine Director Manton," said Hayes. "On the off chance that there is a warm body coordinating this thing, I'd ask that you analyze your visuals to learn if someone is making the rounds in person. It's a start."

"We'll get started right away and let you know as soon as we click, if we click." came the sober voiced reply back.

Hayes wasn't surprised that Manton was in the loop. More surprising was that he wasn't handling it in the first place. But that sort of speculation was not pertinent at the moment.

Manton hung up the phone in a funk. Direct requests from the president were unusual, and bringing other people into the circuit was sure to cause a leak, and the leak situation was why he hadn't simply said 'yes' to the president's chief of staff. He'd have to choose his analysts carefully and feed them mushroom dirt. All he wanted was the correlation. Damned awful way to have to run a spying agency, he thought grimly for the hundredth time. An idle thought crossed his mind. He wondered if he should run this situation by DNI Criester? Bring him into the loop. Wouldn't be seemly, holding out on the old fud. Might come back to bite him some day. He pondered.

Not far away the president had his first meeting of the morning. Leaning forward in his fine chair, hands clasped in front of him on his brilliant desk he smiles broadly at Senate Leader Ronson Poole. He knows that since he took office there has been some discussion of who truly leads the party. Daily overt and covert discussions. By his supposedly own guys.

Poole is an older gentleman from the oldest school of cutthroat politics. Collegiality and stilettos have served him lo his many years in and out of power in his branch of the government. Nominally he was in the same political party as the president.

Stiff necked, daring anyone to chop it, he radiates defiance at the moment. If possible McClane's smile only broadens, showing impossibly white teeth. Manicure, pedicure, oral cure. He believes in keeping his number one asset well oiled and running fast.

"Leader Poole," he says expansively.

"Mr. President," intones Poole with his well rehearsed mortician's eloquence.

After three years of tangling with the man across the desk McClane's butter and honey diplomacy tactics were laid aside awhile ago. The man was a human calculator.

He said, "You *will* be at the rally this evening and you *will* brag on me and my administration. Your jet or mine?"

"Mr. President," said Poole with practiced tiredness. "I have things to do. I can't possibly..."

McClane, still smiling, shook his head slowly. "No, you will be there. It's your owned damned state after all."

Poole quickly glanced at the well known wooden placard on the wall which read *No Cussing*, and then back to the president.

"You're gonna be there and you're going to be saying nice things or I'll promise you this minute that I'll call you out for the miserable SOB that you are in front of 35,000 voters inside and no telling how many outside, and God and the country too."

McClane didn't feel too badly about kicking Poole. He'd finally learned that it was the only way to agitate the formaldehyde in his veins enough to get him going. He even suspected that he liked the abuse.

"You wouldn't do that Mr. President," said Poole calmly, his facial muscles as dead as a Ken doll smacked by an 18-wheeler. "It would mess up the party."

"I'm willing to take that chance," said McClane grinning no longer. "And besides it will be fun! And the other party is having their own rally in some closet on the other side of town. Give 'em hell."

One thousand one. One thousand two. McClane ticked off the seconds in his head. At fifteen, computations complete, Poole asked, "What time is lift off Mr. President?"

My God, thought McClane. A man would be a fool to play poker with this guy.

Elsewhere in the White House Cafeteria Hayes sat over in a corner twiddling his thumbs, his table with four chairs quite empty. Not even a monogrammed cup of coffee. It was between meals and guests were sporadic. Many knew him, but no one offered to sit down. Word was that he was a man of few words, and that was so.

His phone rang. It was the NSC guy, Cornichon who had thrown the first ball. He hadn't even spoken with him to date. He had all the information. Besides, these days the leaky NSC wasn't a place to hang around. Didn't used to be that way, he grumbled to himself.

Out back, beside the garden fence Cornichon gave him the most startling information yet.

He spoke quietly, pretending to gaze at the baby pepper plants. "Around here you never know who's listening in. For all I know the peppers could be bugged."

"I know where the bugs are son," said Hayes. "The peppers aren't bugged."

Cornichon leaned down to gently deposit his briefcase beside the electrified chicken wire garden fence. Straightening up, "I was told to deal with you," he said hopefully.

"Yes, deal with me," said Hayes simply. He closed his eyes and could still see the impossibly green lawn and feel the sun on his back. Of course the wide open spaces, garden, and the whole surrounding town for that matter was not so much an abode as a stage play set fashioned after real life. It was a thin veneer to give some tangible thing to cling to. Strip that away and all you'd have left was the inside of a runaway dynamo. These things he had thought about over the years. The government man, a mere electron in a power system so vast that it could never be explained in whole, much less be understood.

Cornichon had been speaking for a few moments when he noticed that the Secret Service guy wasn't listening. He paused and followed the man's face to the bare limbs he seemed to be looking at. Seeing nothing he reached out and grabbed his arm to get his attention. He jerked his hand back quickly. He had felt such power once when he had stroked a baby tiger in the petting zoo as a child. The bureaucratic resentment he felt coming to this clandestine meeting, instead of being invited back into the White House as the VIP he felt himself to be vanished in that instant. He shrank back a little.

The gray unblinking eyes of the man, machine, whatever he was, Hayes, slowly fell on him, whatever reverie he was having with himself over.

"You were saying?"

Cornichon swallowed, his mouth suddenly dry. What had he gotten himself into? "Um," he stammered, "I was saying that now our source is telling us that the nations on the list, some or all of them will meet in a location unknown to sign an agreement to uh, go to war with the U.S. with seeds.

"What else?"

Cornichon shook his head. Don't know where, but we do know when. Gonna be Saturday evening and everyone on the master list must sign or everyone goes home and forgets about it.

"Anything else?"

"Nothing else."

"Thank you Mr. Cornichon. As you know if you hear anything else report directly to me."

Cornichon picked up his briefcase. "What's it all about?" he asked.

"We'll be in touch." was the only reply he got.

Wednesday

President McClane strolled back into the bedroom in his bathrobe, fresh from his shower. Betty said drowsily, “Who pulled the guard from my garden?”

McClane cut his eyes, “Nobody honey. Go back to sleep.”

“I’m showing it off at a tea this weekend to some ladies from the French Preservation Society.”

“I know honey,” lied the president. “Go back to sleep.”

She rolled over, purring once again.

McClane shook his head, as he did so often now, amazed. Before, even at his height in the business world she had never been one to give tea parties. She had gone to some, sure. And he had expected a fuss about the expected pomp and frumpiness at the start, but she had surprised him, falling right into it the way she had, petit cucumber sandwiches, wine and cheese. He detested cucumber sandwiches.

Later in the day Tabriq Harritz walked into his papershot 8 x 10 office at INN. Outside his door row upon row of men and women shuffled papers, peaked at screens, and exchanged papers, both paper and electronic. He had no clue what went on out there other than some of the peons were producers producing. He knew none of them by name, and didn’t wish to. They simply weren’t on his level.

Opening his mini-fridge in the corner he slipped out an energy drink, and sat down at his desk to type in his password to his ever glowing screen.

One of the peons, a woman, swished in to deposit fresh papers on his desk. At a glance, fashionable skirt and a white top flared out and descending halfway to her belly button. She stood there a little longer than necessary, as if wanting to ask something.

He looked up at her, a bit annoyed.

“Well?” he asked.

“Well?” she replied, with a coquettish grin.

Uncomprehending, he shooed her away with the back of his hand. She left.

Flipping through the new papers he nodded approvingly at the proposed outline for the nightly show. It would only become a rundown anywhere from two hours to two minutes before show time, depending on the breakies.

Satisfied he downloaded the day’s talking points. They rarely changed, and all had the same theme....Destroy McClane. That much hadn’t changed in the last four years, three of them during the president’s stint in office. There was something smart and comforting in that.

Next he opened his Chugnotes in one screen and his browser in the other to visit his favorite websites so that he could grab valuable material for his show. Long ago he had stopped peeking at the forum comments as they were all uneducated, rude, and nearly uniformly derogatory to him when his name came up. He only consumed the articles, and only those by people he trusted to deliver his point of view.

At last satisfied, he dashed off a 500 word article for the house site entitled, “McClane Must Be Impeached.”

Later in the day he visited the INN site to admire his work. In his notes he added: mention that “unnamed” source says president MUST be impeached.” He was still smiling at lunch as he ate his petit brie and cucumber sandwich.

Hayes had elected to remain in the garden. He had no office and no staff. In the garden he had a chair. He had his cell phone. Until he had more information he knew there was damned little he could do.

About 3PM the First Lady strolled by with who he presumed to be her secretary, for they were deep in discussion about party favors, linens, and cheese, in the snatch of conversation that he heard.

She smiled briefly at him in passing. In his view the plastic wrap covering the plants fluttered slightly in the breeze and the little heater cycled on and off in a monotonous way. The temperature was cooling quickly and though his coat did little to stave off the wind he didn't take much notice. He never shivered in the cold and neither did he sweat in the heat. His body was a machine designed perfectly to house his calculating mind.

The phone buzzed in his pocket. He had been hoping, if not really expecting to hear back from Manton. Instead it was the Cornichon man again.

"Update," came the voice from the receiver. "Just got word from Italy who got word from Washington that the Italian Embassy is giving a reception tomorrow evening. My source says it's a bit unusual."

"How come?"

"Because these things are planned ahead weeks and months at a time. Seems to be a hurried up affair."

"Did you check with State?"

"I don't know anyone over there but I can ask around."

Hayes thought for a moment. Snooping around State might not be a good thing. Nobody went to gossipy State lately unless it was to deliver bad news.

"Tell you what," said Hayes. "See if you can get Mandy Greerson the U.N. ambassador. If not her, then whoever packs her papers. Don't get talky. Just pump her for what she can tell us, and get me an invitation."

There was a silence on the other end. Then, "Am I working for you now?"

"Can be."

Silence again. Hayes knew Cornichon was thinking. "Well... ok."

"Good. Call me any time."

Click.

Thursday Evening

The reception at the Italian Embassy began with the guests arriving at 8PM for hors d'oeuvres and cocktails. The spacious reception room had been cleared at the close of the business day at 5PM and the finest linens thrown atop tables laden with choice food, much of it pasta dishes catered in from local Italian restaurants. Of course there was brie and crackers for the less adventurous as well. An open bar sat opposite the door, the bartender wearing a tux. No French or California wines.

Aurora had her man Georgi, now her chauffeur, stop by a burger drive through where she ordered the cheeseburger and fries special which she wolfed down, careful not to drip the condiments onto her fashionable evening gown, white, flowing, and with ample décolleté. The first rule, as she was well taught was to eat *before* going out to dine.

Burlington Hayes arrived at 8PM sharp to hand over his invitation to the receptionist at the door. Behind her stood two well toned gentlemen, not smiling, wearing approximately the same clothing as he, black suit, white shirt, and black tie. Glancing down he noted their black shoes were well polished. Spit shine.

Several guests back, Dillard Cornichon inched up to the door with *his* pass. He had been standing near the entrance since 7:30 when Hayes arrived. He winced at the sour look he got when he produced the extra invitation, but Hayes had not said that he couldn't come as well. He had been to many fine things in his life, but never a diplomatic reception.

"Just pretend you don't know me." was all he had said to him.

Inside, muted, music from an Italian opera was playing over hidden speakers. Hayes, cutting his eyes this way and that noted that the guests, some of them, seemed to be keeping time in various ways with the music. Evidently they had heard it before. To him it was like so many cats screeching but it did not dull his machine like concentration.

He drifted over to the serving table to get a small dish of spaghetti. A server offered a silver fork and spoon, neither of which he took, and another poured a half glass of wine.

With his plate and cup he chose the most advantageous position to watch. He had spent the afternoon reviewing photos from the internet of the various ambassadors on his list, and his keen eyes scoured the room for them.

Each scan brought him back to a certain woman. She was tall, well proportioned top and bottom, wearing a satiny white gown. Holding a plate (less fork) and a glass of untouched wine, she leaned against the east wall keeping time to the screech coming from the speakers.

His gaze locked onto her. Her lips were perfect with the dark red stain of lipstick. Her legs went on forever. Her arms had just the right amount of tan, and her jet black hair fell below her shoulders.

He shook his head to clear it, quickly glancing around the room, locating Cornichon, twirling his fork in his plate of unknown pasta, speaking to another beautiful young lady across the room. She was a beauty, but she couldn't compare to the woman on the east wall. His eyes slowly scanned across the room back to her.

The diamond on her breast. Was it real or fake, he wondered. He'd have to get closer to make a determination. She was still tapping her hand to the tune above the mumble below. Tap tap. Tap tap tap. Her hand tapping her seductive breast. Tap tap. Tap tap tap.

Suddenly Hayes' wondering eyes hardened. She was tapping, but it was not in time to the music. Tap tap. Tap tap tap.

No, this was wrong. Something was off. The woman oozed intelligence and charm. Something was badly off here.

He tore his eyes away to observe the room once more. There! The ambassador from Germany was patting the ambassador from Denmark on the back. Tap tap. Tap tap tap. The Denmark ambassador emphasized a point with his hand, swipe swipe, swipe swipe swipe.

Across the room the members of his who's who list were making various motions that amounted to tap tap. Tap tap tap.

Jerking his head back to the woman in white he saw that she was smiling as her eyes moved from one to the other. Tap tap. Tap tap tap.

On the outskirts of the town that never weeps, at Bramble a bald headed old wisp of a man in his bathrobe was sitting on his well furnished couch, his legs drawn up under him. He rested his head on the shoulder of a tall, gray haired man in his bathrobe. The driving beat of the open of The Untouchables played low on the soundbar of the latest 85 inch Singsong OLED television inset into the wall some yards away.

“It’s done sweetheart,” said the man sitting upright, Alexi. “It took great effort on my part but now we know that several countries are set to join in a conspiracy to deprive this country of her seed.”

“We can’t let that happen Snooky,” said Lomax Black dreamily.

Alexi took a sip of very expensive brandy from his snifter. “I now have the list of countries willing to go along, including Canada. And I also know that if any country does not sign, then the deal is dead.”

“Dead is good,” said Black, rewinding the show on his custom DVR back to the beginning.

Alexi’s hand stroked Black’s side. “The deal is struck at midnight on Saturday evening. I don’t know where yet, but all must be present.”

Black restarted the show. The theme music was the best part.

“We can’t just kill or kidnap an ambassador. That would cause an incident. No. That won’t work.”

“Buy one off.” offered Black, snuggling hard into the shoulder.

“Might work,” said Alexi. “But I have a different idea, if there is time. Someone has to be orchestrating this. There is time yet. Once I know who is running the operation I can eliminate he or she. That will stop it in’s its track. It’s the neatest way to tie up the package.”

“Chicago?” asked Black?

“Si mi sweetheart amo. That would be best. America for Americans. Keep it in house. I have just the man in mind who loves his work.”

“Hug me,” cooed Black.

Hayes made his move, his heart quickening. He glanced over to Cornichon who now had two women, one on each side, both tittering as he twirled his pasta. Slowly he inched toward the lady in white.

Coming to rest beside her he could feel the heat from her body as he spun around to touch shoulders with her. The tapping stopped. She looked up from her plate, turning her face toward him. When their eyes met her breast heaved and she moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue.

Hayes sat his untouched plate and wine on a chair beside him, and taking hers he did likewise. Holding out his hand he said, "I'm Burlington Hayes."

She took her hand into his. It was silky soft, but hot. He saw her gasp as their hands shook. She glanced down nervously, sliding her hand from his, not abruptly.

"I don't know your name," he said softly.

Regaining her composure she said, "Viola Spumani."

He paused a moment, lost in the light scent of her perfume, calculating. At last he said, "I know why you are here."

Whatever momentary weakness she had passed. "I'm here for the reception," she offered.

"And to entertain a compact between nations to deny America her seed," he replied.

She backed off a couple of inches to look him over from his toes to his well muscled face, especially his cold steel eyes. She looked for any hint that she might end this sudden danger she found herself in by offering to buy him off with her body. She found no solace.

"I think you must be incorrect," she started.

"Come come," he said, a not unkind smile fleeting across his lips. "It takes a professional to spot a professional."

She realized at that moment that her back had stiffened. A series of thoughts had quickly come and gone. Flight or fight. Lie or kill. She relaxed, moving to an empty chair to sit down, patting on the one beside.

Hayes sat down, his posture pure, his quickening pulse threatening to undo him. Her lips so close to his, the screech drowned out by the beating of his own heart.

"Is Viola really your name?" he asked softly. "Your accent sounds Italian, Latin."

"I am Italiano," she replied. She did not answer his first question.

"Whom do you work for?"

No answer.

"No matter," he said with an unmistakable tinge of regret. "You must be on your way out of the country tomorrow, first class airfare to anywhere on Uncle Sam."

She had been looking down at his folded hands as he spoke. Now she looked up slowly to meet his eyes. "I am being watched?"

"No," he said. "And you won't be if I have your promise that you will be on that plane. You haven't done anything...yet."

He saw her eyes narrow just a millimeter. She said, "Then my pasaporte is not...ah... abrogated. I do not think you can force me to leave."

Haye's eyes flicked from hers. There it was. She had called his bluff. No, she could not be forced to do anything if she were not provably a clear and present danger. He said, "I think we can."

"I think we shall see then," she said with a touch of haughtiness.

Hayes felt his chest muscles tighten, as if someone had just thumped him hard just above his heart. He certainly didn't wish to argue with this woman. He started to speak, but no words came.

Her eyes still aflame Aurora stood, making to leave, but as she stood the blood seemed to rush from her head for a moment and she felt faint, adrenaline coursing through her veins. She swayed, just a little, involuntarily reaching behind to cushion her fall back into the chair.

She felt strong arms grasp her from behind. In a flash Hayes was out of his seat, his arms encircling her just below her breasts. She felt the tiger strength of him and knew he would never let her fall. They stood there like that for seconds, only it seemed to last much longer. Leaning back she nestled into his body, then suddenly, her sight clearing, regretfully broke away. He watched, as she quickly made her way through the crowd, looking neither to the left nor the right, and then she was gone. At that moment he experienced an almost incapacitating lethargy, as if all love had fled. He was wretchedly dumbfounded.

After long moments, head hung low, he turned his gaze from the doorway, so far away across the room. Lifting his eyes, in the center of the magnificent reception room his eyes locked on Cornichon, a beautiful girl on each arm, his fork no longer twirling. He was staring at him, mouth open, a look of great confusion on his face.

Not far away in the White House cafeteria which was deserted, save for the kitchen help McClane got up from his seat to walk over to the wall to cut off half the lights. He walked back over to the now dimly lit table, and re-took his chair. Pops Phillips sat diagonal to him at the narrow presidential retro oak table against the wall. A perk of the office.

Taking a swig from his diet soda the president said wistfully, "About Denver the other night. All the fans outside...in the snow and the wind. Just once I'd love to feed 'em barbeque. Old fashioned like. You know, give them something to do outside while the rest are inside having all the fun. Damn, it was cold. I don't see how they do it."

Pops sipped his cold coffee slowly, down to the dregs of his Styrofoam cup, making it last. The night kitchen man had not seemed too pleased to still have guests at this time of night.

They had this conversation more than once. "Mr. President, I don't think even you could feed 37,000 hungry McClainites at a go. Jesus, maybe. Why we'd have to bring in a special meat plane, and then the local food trucks, if they have, any would all be in a snit."

"I know," said the president shaking his head sadly, and he was sad about it.

"And," adding Pops, "I doubt some of the towns, heck most of them, would even give us a food permit for the evening."

"Rascals!" said McClane.

Conversation lagged. McClane looked up from his can, "Pops you aren't getting any younger. Why don't you take off early, go home and get some rest. Good rest. We won't get started in the morning until 6. What you say?"

Pops stood, hefting his binder under his left arm. McClane said helpfully, "Hey. Don't worry about the cup. I'll get that for you."

Pops threw him a two finger salute and strolled out smartly, his shoulders only slumping when he was out of sight. He was an old man, and he was thinking that he did deserve his pitiful rest. But he was also thinking that he wouldn't have missed this crazy wild ride for everything he owned.

Hayes saw Cornichon ditch the two women and make a beeline for him. When he drew near, he heard through his thoughts, “Who was that?”

Hayes shook it off, literally shook his head. Eyes flaring, “That was the operator, the coordinator. Here making contact with the signatories, I expect.”

Cornichon sat his empty plate down beside the other ones. “And her name?”

“Viola Spumani.”

“Viola?” repeated Cornichon askance. “You have to be kidding.”

“Not her real name, of course,” said Hayes.

“So, why didn’t you arrest her, or call the cops or something?” asked Cornichon clearly baffled.

“She has done nothing.” Said Hayes simply.

“Oh,” said Cornichon. “Well, where is she staying?”

Hayes stood there a pregnant moment. “I...I don’t know damn blast it.”

Cornichon had not known this iron man for long, but even so his outburst startled him. Hayes grabbed his arm. “C’mon, maybe we can still catch her!”

They ran to the door, stopping in the entryway. The parking was VIP only with carhops. She was standing on the curb craning her neck, looking down the street.

“Listen, she saw you in there but there is no way she made you. I hope. Go out there keeping your back to her and order my car. He handed him the ticket. Then get back out of sight. You got any cash money?”

“Sure.”

“Slip the hop a twenty. Hurry!”

Cornichon made to say something but thought better of it. Maybe he’d get it back.

A full five minutes later Hayes stood on the curb with Cornichon helplessly watching her car drive off. At least he had the license and make. Worse came to worse they could probably track it at least part way using traffic cams. A moment later his car came screeching up.

Shoving Cornichon toward the passenger door he ran around, stuffing a twenty into the hand of the attendant and slipping in at the same time. His seatbelt warning chime sounded as he sped off in the direction the car had gone.

Willing the car to be ahead, driving straight, praying no cops were sitting on the side streets he slipped in and out of traffic. Presently he caught sight of his suspect, and gaining ground he closed close enough to make out the tag. It was her!

Watching his rearview, he slowed and turned into a narrow parking lot, speeding through to the far entrance and back on the road, three cars in between his car and hers. Beside him, Cornichon involuntarily working both a phantom gas pedal and brake with his feet noticed that his back, shoved into the backrest, was wet with sweat.

“You going to call for backup?” asked Cornichon, his eyes glued to the cars ahead.

“What backup?” asked Hayes.

“Oh,” said Cornichon.

Cornichon, the effects of mild shock just wearing off made for small talk, seeing that his ‘partner’ wasn’t talking. “Hey, the food back there was actually pretty...”

“Shut up,” said Hayes flatly.

“Yes sir,” replied Cornichon.

Keeping cars between, eventually they tailed her to her Del Ray apartment. Even in the suburbs there were always cars coming and going, so their cover was unbroken. Well behind

they saw the car stop. Turning into the nearest drive, the house dark, Hayes rolled down his window and cut the engine and lights.

Cornichon, though just a passenger, knowing that whatever happened he had an excuse, namely Hayes, nevertheless mopped his brow. He was a profuse sweater, though he didn't generally do so on cool evenings, which this was. He kept looking at the house that belonged to the driveway they were parked in. The last thing he needed was for an irate owner to come out and challenge him. Looking at Hayes looking down the street, he wondered how a guy could be *that* cool.

"I'm a worrier," he whispered.

"I noticed that," replied Hayes in a normal voice.

"And I got to pee."

Hayes considered requesting backup but nixed it, and for reasons he couldn't even justify. His inner turmoil was furious. So he tossed out the high and low and settled for the six of spades. He wanted to speak to her alone, again, professional to professional. See what she would tell him. Find some way to get this over and be rid of her with a minimum of fuss. He knew from long experience that the more people you bring in, the less control anyone really has. At least that was the product he was selling to himself during the long evening.

A few minutes after they arrived, the driver of her car left, alone. He could see the lights through the side windows and after a time they went out as well. Beside him, Cornichon snored so loudly that he had to roll his window up for fear of waking up the neighbors. He decided to make his move at breakfast.

A short time later a non-descript black SUV with tinted windows which had been cruising around pulled into the back parking lot of an old church that had been transformed into housing units. Finding the one single empty parking space the driver pulled in.

Hector Lopez (Not his real name) was astounded by the compactness of the jam packed buildings on the streets of Alexandria. Full blown businesses side by side with single family dwellings, the old with the new beside the transformed. Except for the lack of graffiti, it much reminded him of his former home in Guatemala. A bit newer perhaps, circa 1940's.

Lopez was in D.C. scouting for a contract killing when he got a call from his broker in Chicago. The man had explained that he had a job offer which must be carried out by the next day, preferably overnight or in the morning. It was his lucky break, for he was at the right place at the right time. Once in a lifetime score. When he scoffed he was offered an amount of money so ridiculous that it was impossible to refuse. Besides, the job would be easy and low risk. But it was an emergency and must be done immediately.

Lopez knew he was being rash, but the money could not be denied, and his broker never failed with prompt payment. And besides, if the job could not be done reasonably, he would back out. There was always plenty of work.

He was given to keep watch for a woman at the Italian Embassy. From inside the embassy to Bramble, on to Chicago, and then back to Hector he got the call that the woman was leaving. He was gratified to get a good look at her on the curb as he circled the block. Luck was with him as he made his circle again just as she got into a car (driven by someone else he noted) which sped away. Keeping his distance, he trailed her to an apartment. So far, so good. Turning into a drive a few doors down he sat for awhile until her lights went off and then made to find someplace in the crackerbox neighborhood to overnight.

Time enough in the morning to drive by and catch her outside.

Storing his location in Maps in his burner phone he eased out and drove around the broader neighborhood where he nixed one possibility after the other. There was simply no parking on the streets that would guarantee that he'd be left alone from the police overnight. Finally he located the single parking space that was open behind an apartment building on Commonwealth. He knew he'd be on video, but calculated that the odds were good that he'd be left alone. And he was.

Friday

Shortly after 7AM Cornichon rolled up to let Hayes get into the passenger seat. A little earlier he had gotten out to walk up and down the sidewalk, keeping the Spumani house in sight while his 'partner' went for breakfast. In this case two cups of coffee and a hot biscuit. One cup he poured out, leaning into the vehicle, much to the disgust of Cornichon, urinating into it.

After they had eaten Cornichon pulled into the drive and Hayes went to knock on the door. Meanwhile Aurora's man Georgi pulled up in his car.

"Who are you?" he challenged from his open door before getting out to quickly stride over to Hayes.

"Who are *you*?" Hayes shot back. Hayes was 6'2" of coiled spring material facing what appeared to be a skinny overly dressed preppie boy in need of a shave.

Arrogantly, unwisely, Georgi replied, "The man who gonna kick your ass. We don't want nothing."

Hayes cocked his head, studying the situation. "You work for Viola Spumani. Her driver."

"Never heard of her," said Georgi cockily.

"She's inside. Why don't we go talk to her?" asked Hayes.

"Told you old man, you got no biz here so you gonna leave before I call the police."

"I thought you were going to kick my ass." offered Hayes.

"You better hope I don't." retorted Georgi.

Meanwhile, unnoticed by either Hayes or Georgi in the doorway, nor by Cornichon who sat nervously in the car struggling with whether or not to call 911, the man from Chicago rode slowly by taking in the scene from behind his tinted windows.

He had no idea what he was seeing, but whatever it was he definitely wanted no part of it, so he drove just around the corner to pull up and park.

Unseen to all, Aurora, already dressed, and waiting on Georgi slipped out of the back door and began fence hopping to get to the next street over to get to a place where she could call a taxi.

Cornichon finally exited the vehicle to side Hayes. Hayes, having had quite enough reached out to grab a fistful of collar from the smartly dressed but talky young man. "Invite us in."

Georgi wagged his head which caused Hayes to twist his iron grip on the collar threatening to cut off his wind. "I already knocked and no answer, so I'm only going to ask you one more time; invite us into the house."

At last he felt Georgi go slack. He let go. Georgi, bending down, retrieved the key from under the mat and unlocked the door. He looked back at Hayes with a glare as he turned the key.

"Hello," said Hayes through the open door. Silence.

Shoving Georgi inside he motioned for Cornichon to follow. "Keep an eye on this guy," he said, going further inside. Checking, she had been there. The bathroom was still damp from her morning shower and...he got a whiff of her perfume.

Returning to the living room he asked Georgi, "Ok, so where is she?"

Georgi looked puzzled. "She no hear. I told ya."

Hayes swiveled his head around and then back to lock on Georgi. Shoving him backwards so that he plopped onto the couch he said, "So I guess you'll just have to do."

Lopez had seen enough. He wasn't exactly sure what he had seen but he doubted it was gangsters. The larger man at the door had that 'government' look about him. This was definitely heading south out of his comfort zone. Pulling away, looking for police cars to roll up any moment he flipped out his phone and called his broker, telling him what he had seen and asked

for further instructions. Clearly he had almost stepped into a bad situation and he didn't know if his man in Chicago had sent him into a trap or if something had changed. No matter, he would not proceed until he had a better understanding of who he was dealing with.

Inside the house Hayes pulled out his credentials and showed them to Georgi. Georgi, much relieved, likewise pulled out *his* credentials to show to Hayes. He said with a smirk, "So you see bigga man, I have a diplomatic immunity. You have a no right to shove me around much less to be inna this house."

That stumped Hayes. Mentally, the various forms he'd have to fill out ran through his mind. He backed off a foot holding outstretched hands, palms to the floor. Georgi grinned in triumph.

"Tell you what Mr. Georgi. You see miss Spumani, tell her that I'll see her off at the airport. Today." He took his card case out of his coat pocket and flipped one into Georgi's lap.

"I be sure to do that," said Georgi still smirking.

Hayes turned to Cornichon, and with a glance indicated that they should leave.

On the way to the car, Cornichon, some sense of what had just transpired behind him said dejectedly, "I'm fired."

"Nonsense," said Hayes. "The last thing that clown is going to do is start a rumpus at this stage of their game."

"Do you really think she's on her way to the airport?"

"No." replied Hayes succinctly.

"Then where..."

Hayes angrily jabbed the key into the switch. "How should I know?" He drove off back in the direction of the White House. "I'm beat. Going to go back to the office, drop you off and grab a couple of hours of downtime. I'll figure out what to do next when I get back in. Maybe something will pop." He alone knew that he could have ended the affair the previous evening. Why he didn't still mystified him.

He was so angry at himself that he didn't notice the taxi that pulled away from the curb to follow discreetly behind. Nor did he see the other vehicle following the taxi.

An hour and a half later inside his modest condo home in Tahoma Park he laid his coat neatly over the back of the couch, ripping off his tie and unbuttoning his shirt. He wasn't particularly sleepy; he always had to force rest on himself in mid-case. He mainly needed time to think.

Rifling the mostly empty pantry he found a can of dubious date worthiness of Chefman's Ravioli and was just about to apply the can opener when he heard a rap upon the door. Tap tap. Tap tap tap.

Dumbfounded, he sat the unopened can down, retrieving his pistol from his coat on the way to check the spyhole. It was Viola Spumani, and she was alone. Cautiously he opened the door, and after a quick peek around opened it wide for her, his gun hand at his side.

Her eyes traveled directly to the pistol as he closed the door but she said nothing, walking slowly past him, through the living room into the kitchen where she saw the can and can opener. Back out again, around the corner to inspect the bathroom and washer room and finally back to the bedroom. Here she stepped in and paused. Bed neatly made, not a sock on the floor.

Hayes slipped his gun back into his coat, and patiently stood beside the couch. His keen eye noted that she was dressed in a red pantsuit and jacket carrying a small black purse. The thought that she might be carrying a weapon was considered briefly before being dismissed, possibly foolishly. More, he was astonished. Still, standing beside the couch, arms folded, he kept his silence as she, catlike, explored his rooms.

Satisfied, she came back to the living room to sit down on the couch, inches from his coat, brushing lightly against him as she gracefully kicked off her black heels and pulled her legs up under her.

Oh, she's good, thought Hayes. So this is how a good American is compromised, he mused. The woman was hot, sizzling, and again, he could feel her heat when they all but touched.

Aurora patted the couch seat beside her. Hayes looked longingly where her hand had been. The muscles around his eyes tightening, he wavered. The correct thing to do was to sit across the room in his TV chair. That was the proper thing to do. He sat down beside her, almost touching. She smiled.

Between meetings with the President of Brazil and the Israeli Prime Minister McClane flipped through the next day's agenda as Pops Phillips looked on. It was a refresher as these events had been long scheduled.

He quick flipped to get to his favorite sheets on tomorrow evening's rally at Aggie Memorial Stadium in New Mexico. He noted, 'official seating capacity thirty thousand'. Well, they'd bust that record.

Looking up, "I heard on the news that the oppos have a counter rally scheduled across town somewhere."

"That's correct, Mr. President," nodded Pops smiling.

"What do you hear?"

"They claim to be expecting a pretty good crowd down at the Civic Center."

McClane returned to his reading. "Hmmpf. Are *they* giving out free barbecue?"

"Nope," replied Pops, "but I hear they'll have some mighty hot hotdogs. They bought up the meeting rooms but out on the court the city is hosting the World Invitational Stripper Pole Competition."

McClane chuckled slyly.

Not far away at Tahoma Park, the assassin Lopez sat within easy viewing of the condo apartment that his prey had gone into. His broker had so far not returned to answer his query, and the money on the table was heavy on his mind.

Someone had let her in, so she was not alone. Perhaps she was about a daytime romance. Maybe her old man wanted her room temperature. The longer he pondered the better his explanation wore on his mind. His earlier fright melted like the morning fog. Yes, she was slipping around. That was her husband back at the other place. The law, if it was the law caught him violating one of those crazy gringo stay away orders.

He marveled at his intuition as he slowly screwed the silencer onto his Ruger .22.

Rigid as concrete, sweating, hands firmly in his lap, eyes straight ahead, Hayes asked, "So how did you find me? What are you doing here?"

Aurora diffidently placed her arm on the back of the low couch within millimeters of his starched white shirt. She looked directly at him, varying her gaze from his face to his chest. The first two buttons were undone. "Did I disturb your routine," she asked innocently.

"No," he said swallowing hard. Again, as it was all he could think to say at the moment, "What are you doing here?"

Halving the millimeters, "You frightened me this morning when you came to *my* house darling. So I slipped out the back way. I really was at a loss for where to go."

"Why didn't you just go back home then? Your man Georgi pulled the diplomat routine on us. Surely you know that. We weren't there long. You vanished and that was that. You could have stayed vanished, so again, why did you come here of all places?"

Her hand, with the lightest of pressure brushed his closely cropped hair, which caused him to stiffen even more. She relished her power over him, and yet...there was this undeniable chemistry going on.

"I was followed," she said simply. "Was it one of your men?"

Hayes, puzzled, turned to look at her. Her dark scarlet lips were so near, her long dark hair so enticing. Consciously he pressed his head back into the sofa to draw nearer to her hand, the heat warming him.

"It, we," he stumbled, "No, it was not one of mine."

Her face tightened, "I ordered the taxi drive to follow you discreetly. But by and by I saw the car following the taxi. He turned as we turned."

"Perhaps he was following me," offered Hayes.

"Perhaps," she agreed. She was safe for now.

Maybe it was Criester, he thought. Or another Secret Service agent. The FBI. The president might have wanted insurance. Spooks within spooks. It was DC after all.

"Is the car here now?" he asked?

"We lost him," she said hopefully.

"Yeah, sure you did," replied Hayes, the mood somewhat broken. He stood up and walked over to the window two fingers to the curtain to peek out. The parking lot looked normal enough. Half full, the bureaucrats all happily at work.

Hayes walked back over and sat down beside Aurora once again. This time he took her hands into his, relishing the warmth. "Now tell me," he said, his eyes locked onto hers, looking deeply within her, "What is this all about?"

Aurora was dimly aware that she was trapped. She could not remove her eyes from his.

"You, you tell me first," she said, the words coming in gasps.

Calmly, "We know that you are a professional perhaps working for the Italian DIS or CISR, but I'm only guessing. Even now our DNI is narrowing it all down."

"And you are?"

"Secret Service to the president."

"But senhor," she said earnestly. "We are not after your presidente. He is a great man. If you thought that then I would not be sitting here with you now. I would be in prison or dead."

"I'm...on loan," he said simply.

"I do not see," she said confused.

Hayes recognized that the interview, if that is what it was, was going in the wrong direction. She was pumping him for at least as much information as he was getting from her. He changed gears.

He longed to stroke her hair. Setting that aside he said, "You can trust me."

"I do," she replied. "We are both, as you say, professionals and I am caught."

"Then again darling..." There it was again. It just popped out. "What is this about?"

"It is about...about... they do not tell me everything. It is about your seed. Your president, he withdraws his aid from our countries. There are very powerful men who want that money restored for that is how they become wealthy. So much of the money does not get to the poor people. It is turned away into the rich man's banca."

Hayes listened wonderingly. She spoke so earnestly. She could describe oatmeal and still send chills down his spine.

"Surely you see that it is a bad thing," he said appropriately.

"Si, sure, but they do not ask me what I think. I am here to coordinate with the representatives of certain countries to institute an agreement."

"We know the countries," he said.

"But how?" she asked, dumbfounded.

"Are not our information agencies the most powerful in the world? We know *many* things darling."

Actually he didn't know one quarter as much as he wanted to know. He bluffed.

"So, did you set up the program yourself? Is this your design?" he asked to illicit a boast. At the same time he wondered what games she was playing with him.

"Certainly not," she said.

"Then who?"

Her face had been so very slowly moving towards his, but now she backed away slightly. "I could not tell you if I knew. They tell me only who to contact and when to have all meet. I did not get a chance to even meet them all thanks to you!"

"Are there no emails, no telexes, no privacy apps?" he asked. "Why did you feel that you had to meet all the signatories personally?"

"To make sure!" she said.

Hayes thought; attention span problems.

"And why?"

"Because if all do not sign then everything is void. Finito. Boom!" She tossed up her hands and looked to the ceiling as if for divine guidance.

The outburst caused an urge in Hayes that he had never felt before and it was one he could no longer ignore. Suddenly encircling her with his left arm he pulled her lips to his and....

Bang! Behind them the door burst open, the frame splintering. Just as suddenly it was kicked shut by a man holding a gun. Hector Lopez leaning against the door said, "So seniorita, you spend your time kissing other men. Your husband is most displeased."

For a moment only Hayes froze with the unexpected sound. Propelled by the look of shock on his darling's face, thwarted in his moment of amour, instantly adrenalin fueled rage began flooding his system. The back of the couch to the door, both looked over their shoulders. Pulling back from her he asked, "Do you know this man?"

"No!" she said in a strained whisper, frightened, her eyes wide.

In the well trained mind of Hayes calculations were made. Factored in was that the intruder possessed a weapon with a silencer. There was simply no way around what must be done, not

even the guarantee of a next breath. Having made his decision, in one motion he leapt, at the same time shoving the head of Aurora down. Rolling across the back of the couch he regained his feet just inches from the assailant who pulled the trigger, once, twice, three times. Two shots went wide but the first connected.

In the microsecond he faced his opponent he saw the look in his eyes. He knew the man was going to shoot. Instinctively, he began to turn sideways to his right to present less of a target.

Hayes felt the bullet enter the deltoid muscle of his left shoulder but he felt no pain. Shoving the gun down and away with his left hand he swung a roundhouse with his right into the surprised face of his adversary. He was rewarded with a crackling wonderful connect driving the lesser man down to the floor. He delivered a solid kick with the flat of his right foot to the man's face.

Standing over the gunman, now gunless and snoring in unconsciousness he noticed that he had been holding his breath. He sighed and then breathed deeply. The whole of his left arm began to go numb. Looking at his shoulder he was amazed at the lack of blood. Just a reddening stain on his starched white shirt.

He looked down for the gun. He thought he had heard it bounce off the wall when he struck out. Turning around to trace the arc, and finding nothing he turned a bit more. He started to smile reassuringly at his darling whose face was ashen and shocked when he saw that she was holding the gun...and it was pointed at him!

There it was he thought. No way out. Sadly he shook his head and raising his good arm slowly, he pointed to a corner of the ceiling, and then another. She followed his point to each mini-camera. "You have been under surveillance the whole time," he said sadly. "No way out for either of us."

A little after 4PM in the afternoon with business concluded for the day, unless he thought of something else, President McClane sat in his spot in the dining room, signature can of diet soft drink half drank, thumbing around on his 10 inch notebook computer. Fact was that it all but guaranteed that he wouldn't spend any thought capital trolling his favorite lunatic media sites with snarky anonymous comments. That would come later before bed well past midnight with his trusty old laptop.

Unlike most normal human beings who needed down time after a busy and productive day, he didn't. He was his happiest when engaging. But late on a Friday afternoon, begrudgingly, as he always had, he got out of the way to let the employees shut down and lock up.

Scanning his favorite pro McClane news site he saw a headline: *Candidate Loses Mind Again*
McClane ran for his second term unopposed, but on the other side it was pure chaos. He read: *In a campaign tussle at a Hank's Pajama Party outlet in Spinster, Rhode Island with a supporter Jack Butner offers to take him behind the store and whip his ass.*

McClane chuckled. Could have been worse. Could have been a McClane supporter, who McClane felt reasonably sure would have been guaranteed to whip Butner's ample ass. He loved a good fight.

The comments beneath the article were particularly juicy...

Hotsass:

I'm thinking pretty soon we're going to see jumpin' jack lose his trigger finger if he keeps poking it at scarf wearing panty pushers.

Pierre Introspectro:

Isn't that the strangest thing? He couldn't get through a job interview at McB's but he wants to run the country. McClane is gonna kick his azz.

It Takes A Village:

Every village need it's IDIOT and they have found theirs.

Tiring of the babble he flicked over to U-Vid to catch an old Monty Python.

As McClane, done with Python, was working on Benny Hill, back at Bramble Lomax Black was sitting in his little room underneath the great stairs crouched over the keyboard of his 35 year old Commodore 128 computer peering at his 1084 monitor. He had several of these around the mansion. The instructions were being saved to a 5 ¼" floppy drive. He had floppy drives too, but he much preferred the older format.

Far from being a purist, he banked on the fact that the data he stored on the floppies was nearly as safe as if he had employed a Navajo code talker to take dictation. The Basic 7.0 could be broken...if anyone had anything to read it with. In his estimation the feeps *might* know that, but would they go to the trouble? It was almost as good as sending a letter written in cursive.

He was busily putting the finishing touches on the instructions to a certain Saudi prince on how and when to tank the oil market. His plan was to capture barrel oil at ridiculously low prices, after which the market would restart at ridiculously high prices. It had worked every time he did it.

A matching computer system was in Saudi waiting on a hand delivered floppy to begin the process. (Unbeknownst to Black the Saudi prince had recently purchased a huge collection of old games from ZBay at a drachma and a half apiece so that he could already capitalize on his C128 in C64 mode. He was badly addicted.)

The phone vibrated on his desk. Putting it to his ear he hissed, "Yes sweetheart," quite testily.

On the other end Alexi said, "Hello sweetiekins. Just got a call from my man in Chicago. He heard from his man in D.C. Said the assassin is getting cold feet." He briefly outlined the problem.

"In light of possible government interference he's asking if he should call the mission. Or what?"

"Well surely the government knows about the seed scheme. It's the government who told *us* about it after all. Still..."

"I think we should pull it until we understand a bit more about who the players are."

Lomax leaned back in his shabby low backed 80's period piece office chair which made a squeak. "I concur. Advise your man to tell the asset to hold off until we know more."

"Will do sweetheart," said Alexi.

"And how is the darling Premier Utkin?"

"He's fine," drawled Alexi. "He sends love. From Russia."

Hayes stood transfixed, the intruder at his feet. It crossed his mind that this whole thing might have been a setup and right now it could be he on the floor with a .22 slug in his brain. And now Viola Spumani was about to finish the job.

Still wild-eyed she began edging around, hugging the wall until she got to the door. He followed her with his steely gaze.

“Why?” he asked dejectedly? It was not that he minded so badly dying. That went with the job. He was so terribly disappointed in the girl he thought he loved.

Still holding the pistol steadily in her hand, pointed toward his breast, she glanced down at the man on the floor for a long moment.

“I don’t know heem,” she said. Keeping her eye on him she reached around with her hand feeling for the doorknob, and finding it, paused. With a look of ultimate sadness she said simply, “This thing has gone too far but I cannot stop it. Look for the light in the capitol.”

She edged the door open enough so that she could slip through. The door closed and he heard running footsteps.

“What a bloody damned mess!” he spat.

Walking slowly, his feet leaden, he retrieved his phone from his coat pocket on the couch and reluctantly called his boss Todd Apsell. Wearily he walked into the kitchen, laying the pistol on the table, and sat down. The assailant still out cold snored on through his smashed nose. In less than five minutes he heard the sound of distant sirens fast approaching. With the easing of his adrenaline rush his wound began to bleed more freely as he loosened up. His useless left arm hung by his side, blood dripping from his fingers. “Hurry up,” he growled. “I’m going into shock.”

A little after 8PM Hayes woke up in a hospital bed. Cornichon was seated by the window flipping through channels with his bedside remote.

“Where am I?” he asked.

“Georgetown,” replied Cornichon landing on a popular show set in Alaska.

He reached around to feel the heavy bandages on his left arm. “Hurts like hell.”

“Want me to go run down a nurse for some morphine or something?” asked Cornichon, not taking his eyes off the show.

“Turn that damn thing off!” replied Hayes.

Reluctantly Cornichon advanced the channels until the TV on the ceiling went dead.

“Well?”

“Well,” said Cornichon. “They told me you passed out when the ambulance boys got there. The guy you kicked the shit out of is in city lockup on ice. Some kind of territorial dispute. The local cops called dibs and hauled him off.”

“Gotta get out of here and speak to that jerk to find out...”

“Oh,” said Cornichon remembering, “They wanted me to ask you where the video from the ceiling camera was, whatever that means. Evidence and that sort of thing. Said they looked high and low and...”

“Cameras aren’t hooked up,” said Hayes shortly.

“Oh,” said Cornichon.

Cornichon’s phone played a few bars from ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark.’ He removed it from his jacket.

“You don’t say? He did? When? No chance to revive? Right. Right. Bye.”

“That was your boss Todd. He said they found whoever it was that you pancaked his face dead in his cell a half hour ago.”

Haye's shoulder was burning like fire. "Brain embolism?" he inquired snarkily through locked teeth.

"Nope. Said he hanged himself. Sitting on the floor. Somehow. Like he jumped off his cot or something. That's all they told me. But he's definitely dead.

"My God!" said Hayes.

Cornichon looked longingly at the remote. "Hey, you must be in pain. Never heard you string more than five words together."

"Where *is* Todd, by the way? asked Hayes, willing himself to not curse.

"Home with his family, I expect," said Cornichon. "Hey, I bet that hurts. Right in the arm. The doc told me that the bullet...it was a .22 just flattened out when it hit your muscle. Never punched through. Said it was the darndest thing he ever saw. Hey, remind me never to arm wrestle with you because..."

"Shut up!"

He tossed, rather, threw the remote at Cornichon's face. Grinning he caught it in mid air.

The dark stomping music on the Godzilla movie as he ravaged Tokyo matched Haye's mood perfectly. He was a chump. A double silver plated chump and though he longed to scream it aloud, his good common sense and moral code would never allow it. He steamed in gritty silence; his arm feeling like it was pinned beneath a box car.

Ten minutes after 9PM he popped the question that had been bothering him. "What are you doing here?"

Cornichon muted the TV. "I didn't have anything better to do on a Friday evening. We're partners aren't we?"

"Are there any men posted outside the door?"

"Nope." said Cornichon earnestly. "Just you and little old me."

Hayes was hurt, and more than just in his arm. "A man gets shot on duty and not even a dollar's worth of flowers?" There. He let it slip.

"It's Friday night. I guess people got better stuff to do."

"Well, that cuts it," said Hayes.

"Whoa now partner. Sounds like the meds talking. They say that stuff makes a man talky."

Hayes, for the first time in his adult life came as close to having a grievance with the Service as he ever had. More than he ever thought possible. "Been in the service of this country one way or the other all my life, and the first time I get shot, it's Friday night."

"I'm here," said Cornichon raising his hand like a school boy.

"Ouch," said Hayes.

"You want I should get you some water? Enema? Something?" asked Cornichon seriously.

Across town at the Kennedy Center DNI Criester was suffering through Puccini's classic tragedy, *La Bohème*, a very loud Italian opera. Beside him, his wife, her green eye shadow slowly dripping down her face sobbed softly. He had no idea how she did that as she understood not a single word of the language, except perhaps for pasta and pizza.

A thought occurred to him. Making excuses he promised to bring her back a really expensive tub of buttered popcorn and exited quickly to the lobby.

Looking around, he drifted to a wall next to a poster behind Plexiglas hawking a Japanese opera coming to town next month. It was called *Yūzuru*, but being in kanji he had no way of knowing that. He called the night desk man at the DNI and got Hayes' cell phone number.

“Hey,” he said when Hayes answered. “Heard about your little kerfuffle. Too bad. Heard you got it in the arm like in the movies. Bet that hurts! Hey, I just remembered. We got the name you wanted. Viola Spumani. Yeah. Yep. Right. Oh, you already heard that. Well good...”

“So you want what? You want to know if there’s any congressional meetings scheduled for tomorrow? You know that’s Saturday don’t you? Everyone has already split town. Oh...check to see who hasn’t.

“You want me to keep a lookout on *who* again? You faded. You gotta be kidding. On... Hmmm. Well, I’ll speak to Todd if I can find him. Sounds like a job for the Secret Service, since it’s on the QT. Don’t need to bring in the you know who on this. More leaks than a salt shaker. Right. Right. I’ll let you know.”

Criester was *not* pleased when he clicked off. This was someone else’s responsibility. Still the president said to work with the guy. That would just have to be good enough. He felt a headache coming on as he thumbed up Secret Service Director Todd Apsell’s number.

After the call, dropping his cell phone back into his coat pocket he yanked on his belt, slipping his pants higher onto his stomach bulge, and setting his mind to it, he walked back into the war zone, popcorn promise completely forgotten.

Saturday

Hayes had himself released at 6AM Saturday morning with the promise to stop back by the emergency room twice a day so that his bandage could be inspected and or replaced. His left arm was still useless, though the feeling had come back with a vengeance.

Cornichon met him at the front door when the smiling young nurse wheeled him out. Awkwardly slipping into the car seat, Cornichon helped him get buckled in and then handed him a biscuit. The coffee was in the cup holder.

Overnight at the hospital as he alternately dozed and woke fitfully he had determined that his only workable lead might be one of the representatives from California. Of course the signer could be anyone. His hope was that he could put two signers together in the same place Saturday night.

He had Cornichon drive him back to his apartment so he could rest on his lonely couch. He reckoned that there was nothing to be gained hanging around the office. When they arrived, his weariness was replaced by consternation. Someone had drilled a hole through his broken door frame and door, padlocking it in the process. He petulantly ripped off the crime scene tape. That was something anyway!

Motioning to the car he repeated the process of entry, getting helped with his buckle, by Cornichon who evidently had taken him under his wing.

“What now partner?” he asked, both hands on the wheel.

Hayes ruffled his brief hair with his good hand. Reaching for his phone he dialed FBI Director Deke Manton. This was something he’d rather not do, as that whole operation had become iffy lately. He caught him on the golf course.

Briefly, in as little detail as possible he told him that he urgently needed the whereabouts of the diplomats this evening, real time. Manton agreed and he hung up.

Next he called Criester. “About that matter last night...”

Criester, who was loafing around the house replied, “I put your boss Apsell on it. By the way, why didn’t you call him yourself?”

“An oversight,” lied Hayes. He knew if he brought Criester himself into it he doubtless would have been auto-ported back to his shavetail immediate superior, Dodd Thompkins. Too much at stake for dawdling games.

“Well,” said Criester, “He’s on it now. Talk to him. Get up from that desk and walk right into his office man.”

“Will do, and thanks,” replied Hayes, ending the call. He dialed his boss Apsell.

“Mr. Apsell,” he said into his phone. “Mr. Criester called last evening?”

“I guess I was out of my head last night. Yes, I should have called you.”

“Should have called Dodd? Well, like I said, I was all doped up I guess. Anyway, Mr. Criester says you’re handling it personally. Calling for an update on who in congress is still in town this weekend.”

“Really need that information sir. Sure. Sure. I’ll fill you in as quickly as possible. You know I was detailed personally by the president and he indicated he wanted it compartmentalized.”

The conversation carried on. Hayes trotted out a usually well hidden petty streak. He trusted his boss implicitly, but there was still the matter of his unwise hire of Dodd Thompkins on the table, and he got a certain smug amount of satisfaction on denying his old boss a piece of the kill.

“You’ll let me know by late this afternoon then? Right. I really appreciate your kind attention.”

He hung up the phone. Turning to Cornichon he said, "He never asked how I was doing. I think he's jealous."

He knew it was unwise in the extreme letting his feelings be known, but he had come to have a certain amount of trust in his late partner, particularly since he had been the only person to act like he gave a damn.

He had not had a real partner in a long time. Lots of team activity, but not an old fashioned relationship. Even though it was only temporary, he sort of enjoyed it. Getting shot point blank had shaken him worse than he imagined. If the guy sitting beside him was a rat, he'd find out soon enough, and at this point after Viola, getting shot and ignored, he really didn't give a damn. It was not inconceivable to him that at his advanced age of 47 he was getting sappy and stupid.

After visiting the hardware they drove back to the apartment where he had Cornichon apply his new bolt cutter to his door. He needed to tidy up, fetch a new suit, and most importantly get his gun. Naturally, his coat pocket was empty, his service weapon no doubt in the city lockup.

He showed Cornichon, who was standing on a wooden dining chair, which ceiling tile to tilt up to retrieve his backup, the SIG Sauer P229 chambered for .357. It was a replica of his old service weapon though currently he was using the Glock 19 in 9 mil. He preferred the .357 anyway. He hoped he wouldn't have to fire it as they'd surely take it away if he did, after he drilled a diplomat or two.

In conversation with Cornichon, he learned that he was a college man, had never been in the service. Any service. Hence, he did *not* have a weapon. Didn't even own one. Probably couldn't have gotten a license in D.C. if he wanted to. He gingerly handed the weapon down along with a box of shells and a spare clip. Hayes had him put the shells back in the ceiling and close it up once again. If he needed more than two clips he'd be in trouble.

"Hurry up and wait," he told Cornichon. "We can't do a thing until we vector the location."

Cornichon, who had flopped onto the couch nodded, glancing around for the TV remote.

"Come along," said Hayes.

Cornichon dutifully followed him to the washer room where Hayes handed him the mop. "Go clean up the evidence."

Cornichon looked askance.

"Mop up the blood while I get into some fresh clothes."

"Oh," said Cornichon blankly, holding the mop limply.

"Mop, bathroom sink. Clean, rinse."

"Right!" said Cornichon.

At 5:37PM things began to come together. Deke Manton called Hayes and told him that except for House Speaker Doris Duquesne, and possibly some of her staff, the capitol building was bereft of representatives. He told him that the logs never lie. She was it.

As for the diplomats, all seemed normal. No two were together.

"Ok sir," replied Hayes vastly more calmly than he felt. "It's very important now that I know of the one, if this evening, any of the other list members are seen together."

Manton spoke into his ear. "I have some vague notion of what this is about, and it's damned peculiar. Would you like to fill me in."

"No." replied Hayes.

After an ominous silence, "Do you need backup?"

This was the moment Hayes was alternately relishing and fearing. If it all went south there would be no one to share blame with. "No sir, not at this time. Only the fruits of this evening's surveillance please and the sooner the better."

“I hope you know what you’re about,” said Manton. He hung up.

“Shut it off,” said Hayes to Cornichon who was watching him, an old Saturday afternoon John Wayne movie, *The Big Trail*, on mute. “Let’s roll.”

Inside Air Force One, winging its way to New Mexico for the rally, President McClane sitting in his fabulous high backed leather chair looked over his V shaped desk to Pops Dawson lolling on the leather couch across the room.

“Had any complaints this ride so far?” he asked. He always asked.

And Pops always answered the same way. “The passengers (media) in steerage are complaining that it’s a little choppy.”

McClane shook his head sorrowfully then grinned broadly. “Be sure to tip the captain. Heard any word on the seed thing? Supposed to break open tonight isn’t it?”

Pops shook his head. “I can make some calls if you like. Too bad about agent Hayes getting shot in his own house.”

“What do we know about that?” asked the president.

“Mr. President, I’m ashamed to tell you that I don’t know a thing at this point. We don’t know if it was line of duty, domestic, what. He’s been working with Don Criester, as you know, as well as Deke. I haven’t spoken to him. Spoke to Criester yesterday before it happened and he didn’t know much. I assume they have debriefed him by now.”

“Make those calls Pops.”

“Yes sir,” said Pops hurrying toward the door.

“Forget something?” said McClane pointing toward his binder on the couch.

McClane reached behind him for his laptop sitting on the shelf. Plugging it in to the charger he flipped it open and dialed in the Daily Polnews site.

Butner Beats McClane By Double Digits In New Mexico

Internal polling had it the other way around. McClane focused on the comments:

Ellen Rooper: *Woo Hoo!!!! Love our President and First Lady!!!!!! Best we've ever had! God be with President McClane. He has weathered more storms than I have ever seen thrown at a president. God continue to give him strength and help him make good decisions!*

He knew he couldn’t better that. He dropped the screen, walked out of the office and down the hallway.

The first hurdle Hayes and his companion faced was getting into the Capitol. The shortest direct distance was from Union Station, and that wouldn’t do. On the drive in Hayes contacted the duty officer at the Secret Service desk and requested an official car to meet them at the White House Visitor Center to be authorized by Apsell if necessary, which it was. The car was waiting for them when they pulled up.

“Don’t be surprised if your ride isn’t here when you get back,” said the agent.

“Can’t be helped,” said Hayes, “And besides, I can call you for a ride home.”

The official car had no problems driving them right up to the capitol steps, where they were deposited before it drove off.

Inside, they showed their credentials to a Capitol policeman. Hayes made an excuse that they were on a preliminary inspection for a visit from a Himalayan delegation next week. The guard did not question them, as it was not his prerogative, once he was sure of their authenticity. The White House often did odd things. He was not a fan of the president.

Hayes and Cornichon drifted across the House floor to Duquesne’s office. The door was closed. Hayes tried the lock, acutely aware that he was on someone’s video monitor at all times. It was locked. He looked up at Cornichon and shook his head. If he were wrong, the agreement would be signed somewhere in the city and things would not go well for him.

The Speaker's Lobby with all the paintings of former speakers was similarly devoid of life. A slow walk later, Cornichon found himself looking at the Capitol subway corridor a level below. "I'm impressed at how you know your way around this place," he said.

"Just part of the job," said Hayes, "But I don't think anyone knows all the nooks and crannies. Lots of places for them to hide."

"So you had any more thoughts about that Spumani woman's blurt, 'watch for a light' or whatever?"

Hayes winced at Cornichon's description. "Specifically she said 'Look for the light in the capitol.'"

"There are about a million lights in the capitol," observed Cornichon. "I think she was blowing smoke up your ass, ear, whichever to put you off the scent."

The scent of her perfume flashed across Hayes' mind. "Dammit!" he spat.

"Wha? What did I say?" asked Cornichon baffled at his partner's sudden turn of mood.

Hayes didn't reply.

Cornichon looked at the polished and shining cars sitting on their little tracks, the corridor disappearing around the curve in the distance. Then it hit him. "Say, you aren't falling for that Mati Whosis are you?"

Hayes turned to glare at Cornichon. "Where *do* you get your language son? You know you sound like some damned Bogart detective?"

"Aha!" exclaimed Cornichon. "I knew you watched those old movies late at night after a hard day's work guarding the tomato plants!"

"You..." started Hayes, at the smirking Cornichon, but thought better of it. It finally dawned on him that he was being trolled. Dismissing Cornichon with a wave he walked off back towards the chamber.

Upstairs again they heard voices. Peering around the corner from within the walls sure enough it was Speaker Duquesne with a handful of smartly dressed men and women. Even as she was pointing and talking more people joined the group, and one of them was Viola Spumani.

"This is it," whispered Hayes to Cornichon with the tone of dead finality.

"I count 14, not counting the cops with them." whispered Cornichon. Two capitol policemen stood at a respectful distance.

Presently the group moved across the chamber and vanished into a doorway. Hayes and Cornichon jogged to catch up. When they reached the door they saw the two cops, taking up the drag, disappear around the corner.

Waiting for a respectful 30 seconds they followed, easily keeping up by the sound of the chatty Speaker. Walking slowly and quietly on the carpeted floor, soon they began hearing footsteps. "Sounds like they are on the stairs," said Hayes quietly over his shoulder, not taking his eyes off the corridor ahead.

When he adjudged the steps were empty he made his way to them, peeking around the corner. Motioning for Cornichon to be quiet they slowly tiptoed down to the second level where they had come from. Fully expecting the delegation to take the subway he was perplexed when the scene had not changed. In the distance the voice of Duquesne still nattered on, so they followed until they came to another set of stairs where they once again heard her honey dipped chirping. Taking those stairs more gingerly they descended yet another level to the very bowels of the Capitol dome.

Hayes knew there were lots of places to gather for wickedness down there, but what he discovered as they rounded a curve and ran head long into the police quite unnerved him. The

two cops were standing by an open doorway, which beyond, as he well knew, contained a little known set of metal stairs. One was holding a large set of keys in his hand.

The Capitol police, for their part, surprised, drew their weapons, challenging them. The one on the right, thankfully, had been on duty when they arrived, and gently moved the other's pistol to one side.

"What are you doing down here?" he asked suspiciously, not lowering his weapon, but not directly pointing it at him either.

Cornichon, who was standing beside Hayes, and very still at that, started to speak, but Hayes cut him off. "Officer, did you check me out further after you passed us awhile ago?"

"No," said the policeman resolutely. "Your creds checked out in my hand. Besides, who was I going to check with?"

"We need to work on that, looks like," said Hayes. "In the meantime Mr. Cornichon on loan from the NSA and myself with the Secret Service are here to observe that group of people you brought down here."

"Sir," said the policeman, "That is *not* what you told me."

"That's why we have some work to do," said Hayes. "In the meantime, we need to go up those stairs there."

His cop looked at the other cop who shook his head.

"No can do," said the talky one. "The Speaker of the House gave me explicit instructions that they were not to be disturbed."

"Shit," said Hayes shaking his head. "Looks like we're at an impasse. We're *going* up those stairs one way or the other."

Silence.

"Check it out with my boss," said Hayes. "Todd Apsell, Director Secret Service." Pointing a thumb in the direction of Cornichon, "Check it out with *his* boss, DNI Donovan Criester. You can check it with Deke Manton if you like and I know you know who he is."

"I don't have those phone numbers," said the cop, the barrel of his pistol now hanging limply at his side.

"I do," said Hayes. "I'm going to slowly remove this phone from my inside pocket and in that phone are the numbers."

His cop was clearly confused, and by the look on the other's face he wanted nothing to do with it.

"Tell you what," said Hayes. "Call your boss and have him look up the numbers," but for God's sakes hurry."

Both men looked on as the policeman made the call on his walkie talkie, communication repeaters relaying his call up and out to the world beyond. They watched his face as it went through various changes from concern to consternation.

"Agent Hayes," he said finally, "Your phones are useless down here anyway. You're authorized to climb those stairs. You want backup?"

Hayes tapped his coat, feeling his weapon through the material. "No, I don't think so. We're just going to make the climb and we expect to be back down in one piece in a little while. Just stand by and it goes without saying, keep your mouths shut about this afterward. You'll be told what you saw at that time, and you'll get no argument from your commander. Understood?"

Half way up the narrow iron stairs Hayes heard Cornichon puffing behind him. "There are 365 steps," said Hayes, walking and pulling up the winding staircase. "Only about 180 more to go."

“Aw hell,” croaked Cornichon.

A little further up Hayes’ phone buzzed in his pocket. Taking it out he said quietly, “Hayes.” Listening briefly he punched the button, placing it back into his pocket. To Cornichon he whispered, “Manton. Says he thinks some of the diplomats are headed toward here. Said he’d confirm when he hears more.”

“That’s good work,” rasped Cornichon who was dismayed that his elder Hayes wasn’t even breathing hard.

Up they climbed above the inner dome, until they were between it and the shell that everyone sees from the road, in pictures, and from space. As they neared the 365th step they began to hear voices again. Stealth was out of the question now, so they plodded along, one foot over the other.

At last they reached the inner walkway directly beneath the tip (Tholus) of the capitol dome which ran around the circumference. Inside it was brightly lit by double strings of incandescent lights. There they found the 13 huddled around a marble bench where sat a very surprised Speaker of the House, Doris Duquesne, a folder on her lap, pen in hand. Beyond, the marble railing, and beyond that, all of Washington D.C. 26 stories below. The apex of power in America.

Far below and further away a tourist shuttle slowly drove down the stately boulevard, stopping here and there briefly to let the patrons gawk at the sights. The driver, who was also the lecturer and a proud expat Italian at that abruptly brought his bus to a stop, peering out his driver side window. “Well, would you looka at that. Been doin’ this job for twenty a year now and I never seen that. Looka at that grand old capitol dome yonder. She got a new light at the toppa. Ain’t she a magnificent!”

DNI Donavan Criester was among the handful at Andrews waiting to greet the president's triumphant return from his rally in New Mexico.

President McClane descended the stairs and smartly saluted his Marine guards, patting one on the back. "Ah Don," he hollered enthusiastically over the noise. The others were staff and there were a half dozen hopeful reporters well back, their numbers swelling as the media, along for the ride, deplaned from the tail end of Air Force One.

President McClane walked over to Criester, but before either could speak, late favorites, Senators Thurlow of Louisiana and Nancy Rocket from Utah strolled by laughing, and stopping by to glad hand the president, thanking him for the privilege.

Looking over Criester's shoulder, watching them depart he turned his gaze toward him. "So what's up?"

"We resolved that matter regarding the seeds," he said, beaming.

"We did?" replied the president with sincerity and a certain amount of awe.

"Yes sir indeed," said Criester, barely restraining his pride and enthusiasm.

The president patted him on the shoulder.

"We'll have a preliminary report to you sometime next week," he said gravely, "But rest assured, the paper was *not* signed and the matter was concluded. Just thought you'd want to hear it from me personally."

McClane nodded, "I did Don. Fine job. We'll be talking next week. You bet."

Criester fairly glowed as he watched the president disappear into his helicopter for the short ride back to the White House.

Pops Phillips followed, sitting across from the president. McClane said, "Criester just told me that he took care of the seed matter. The world is right, he said."

Pops nodded knowingly. "Did you tell him about the call from Agent Hayes while we were over Kansas?"

"What do you think?" asked the president smiling.

Pops just smiled back at him.

Inside the departure lounge at Dulles little groups of people stood around, their carry on suitcases beside them like faithful little doggies, watching the board for changes. Nearby rows of black seats lined the windows, and outside, down below, the baggage crew busy loading the Delta plane bound for Rome.

Sitting in two of the seats were Hayes and Aurora. Cornichon, along with the dapper dressed Antonio Georgi stood at one end of the room, alternately yawning and fiddling his fingers, pretending he wasn't watching. Georgi alternately peeped, talked to himself animatedly in Italian, and hummed a piece of a tune from an obscure Italian opera. Cornichon was fast getting sick of the ADHD.

"Forget the debrief darling," said Hayes, holding her slight hand, hot in his. "You spun a fanciful tale. Now tell me why you did it?"

"Did which my darling," she said, looking at the floor.

"Why you gave me the clue about the meeting," he replied. They spoke in low tones.

Aurora shrugged her shoulders. "I was caught. Why not?"

Hayes closed his eyes, searching for the right question. "You had the gun my darling. You could have ended it right there."

She gripped his hand tighter. "Oh no mio caro. I could never do that...to you!"

They looked up at the first boarding call.

“Tell me the truth,” Hayes implored passionately. “What will happen when you return? Will you be in danger?” Running away with her had crossed his mind several times. Each time he had stifled his thoughts. He knew from his experience that they could never slip the bounds of the Service once they had their sights set.

She shrugged her shoulders again. “I will be OK, I suppose. I will be reassigned or maybe they tell me to leave. But I don’t be a secret girl. Never again.”

“Would you miss that?”

“No, I hate it.”

Second call.

Hayes glanced left and right and finally to his darling. He crushed her lips to his until he felt her go limp in his arms. Not releasing her, he held her tightly and as one they stood.

Walking slowly to the tunnel she turned to brush his cheek with the back of her hand. “We meet again if God wills,” she said, lost in his eyes.

In a moment she was past his retrieval, lost in the bowels of the aircraft that would take her away. He knew, somehow, that he would never see her again.

Cornichon came up behind him. “That asshole Tony is already on the plane. I think you missed that.”

Hayes stood at the window, the sun setting, airport lights winking on, watching the plane backing slowly away, turning, and then rolling out of sight.

Behind the White House, overlooking the devastated garden, Cornichon eyed a greedy, malevolent squirrel hanging upside down by his hind feet on a low hanging limb not 20 feet away. "I'm gonna shoot that yard rodent right in the eye," he said to Hayes who was sitting in a matching lawn chair beside him.

"Against the rules," said Hayes with utmost seriousness.

"Well what are we going to do about it then Special Agent To The President, Hayes?"

"Just bide our time Special Assistant Agent To The President, Cornichon," said Hayes patting the .357 in his coat pocket.

Behind him someone sneezed.

Thank you for reading *The Brainiacs of Washington*. Be sure to leave a review.