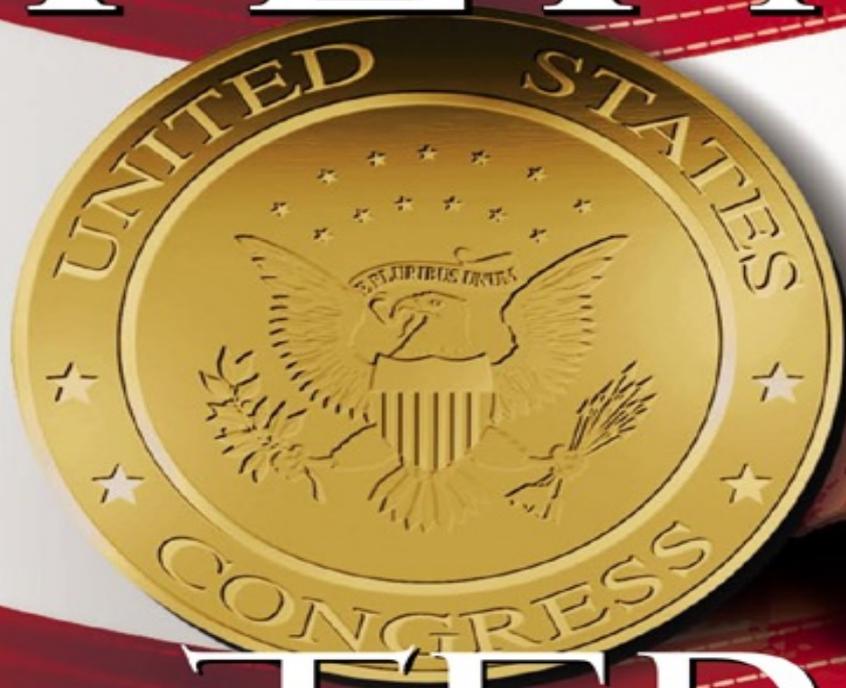


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TERM LIMITS

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*To Tom Clancy, Robert Ludlum, Leon Uris, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Ernest Hemingway, for
inspiring me to live my dreams*

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...Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just Powers from the Consent of the Governed, that whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these Ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government... it is their Right, it is their Duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future Security.

—THOMAS JEFFERSON,

The Declaration of Independence

THE OLD WOOD CABIN SAT ALONE, SURROUNDED by trees and darkness. The shades were drawn, and a dog lay motionless on the front porch. A thin stream of smoke flowed out of the chimney and headed west, across the rural Maryland countryside toward Washington, D.C. Inside, a man sat silently in front of the fireplace, shoving stacks of paper into the hot flames.

The papers were the product of months of tedious and meticulous work. Each sheet represented hours upon hours of surveillance notes, in-depth subject profiles, and maps of neighborhoods throughout the D.C. metropolitan area. He knew when the police patrolled, when the newspapers were delivered, when they jogged and at what time, and most importantly, where his targets slept and what time they awoke.

He and his men had stalked them for months, watching and waiting, patiently discerning which parts of their daily routine could be exploited—and when they would be most vulnerable. His strong hands reached for the fire and stopped short. Letting them hang near the flames, he flexed them straight, then pulled them into tight fists. The men he had been stalking had sent him to some of the most obscure places on the face of the planet to kill people who were deemed a threat to the national security of the United States of America.

He had lost track of the number of people he had killed in the service of his country. He had never intentionally blocked the tally from his mind, it was just something he had never bothered to calculate. Whatever the number was, he held no regrets for the men he had killed. They were honorless, even psychopaths—killers of innocent civilians.

The solitary figure sitting in front of the fire was an assassin of assassins, an exporter of death, trained and funded by the United States government. His short blond hair glowed as he stared deeper and deeper into the flames, the crisp fire eventually turning into a hypnotic blur. Tomorrow he would kill for the first time on American soil. The times, places, and targets had all been chosen. In less than twenty-four hours the course of American politics would be changed forever.

The sun rose over Washington, D.C., marking the start of what would be a long and busy day. With the president's annual budget twenty-four hours away from a full House vote, the town was in a frenzy. Congressmen, senators, bureaucrats, and lobbyists were making a last-minute push to amend or strip certain elements of the budget. The count was too close to call, and the leaders of both parties were exerting great pressure on their members to vote along partisan lines.

No one was exerting more pressure than Stu Garret, the president's chief of staff. It was nearing 7 A.M., and Garret was ready to explode. He was standing in the Blue Room of the White House watching the president read "Humpty-Dumpty" to a group of kindergartners, and his anger was increasing by the second. Garret had told the president that the photo op with the kids was out of the question, but the White House press secretary, Ann Moncur, had convinced the president otherwise. It was rare for Garret to lose to anyone; even on the smallest point. But Moncur had sold the president on the idea that, in the throes of a cutthroat budget battle, it would be good PR for him to look as if he were above the dirty political horse-trading of Washington.

Garret had been working around the clock for the last month trying to get the votes needed to pass the budget. If the budget was defeated, their chances for reelection would be severely hampered. The count would be close, but there was a plan to make a last-minute charge. The only problem was that Garret needed the president back in his office making phone calls, not sitting in the Blue Room reading nursery rhymes.

As was typical of everything at the White House, the event had started late and was now running over

its original half-hour slot. Garret looked down at his watch for the tenth time in the last five minutes and decided enough was enough. Looking to his left, he glared at Ann Moncur, who was standing several feet away. Garret slid between the wall and several other White House staffers and worked his way toward Moncur. When he reached her, he pulled her back and cupped his hand over her ear. "This is the dumbest stunt you've ever pulled. If the budget gets torpedoed tomorrow, you're history. The circus has gone fifteen minutes over schedule. I'm going to the Oval Office, and if he isn't there in five minutes, I'm going to come back in here and personally throw your ass out on the street."

Moncur strained to smile and look relaxed. She glanced around the room and noticed that some of the other staffers and several members of the press were watching. She nodded her head several times and was relieved when Garret stepped away and headed for the door. For obvious reasons, Moncur didn't care for the older, crass chief of staff. Simply put, he was a pain in the ass to work for.

Michael O'Rourke walked purposefully down the hallway of the Cannon House Office Building. It was just after 9 A.M., and the building was crowded with people. O'Rourke avoided making eye contact with anyone for fear of being stopped. He was not in a good mood. O'Rourke didn't like Washington; in fact, it was safe to say he hated Washington. Midway down the hall, he turned into an office and closed the door behind him.

Inside were five men wearing dark suits and drinking coffee. O'Rourke shot his secretary a quick glance, but before she could respond, all five men closed in on him.

"Congressman O'Rourke, could I please have a moment of your time? I just need five minutes," pleaded the man closest to the door.

A short, pudgy man pushed his way to the front. "Congressman, I would like to speak to you about how the farmers in your district will be affected if you don't vote for the president's budget."

The thirty-two-year-old freshman congressman held up his hands. "Gentlemen, you're wasting your time. I've already made up my mind, and I will not be voting for the president's budget. Now if you would kindly vacate my office, I have work to do." The group started to protest, but O'Rourke opened the door and waved them into the hallway. All five men stumbled to grab their briefcases and then headed off dejectedly, in search of another congressman to cajole.

The portly lobbyist hung back and tried to give it another shot. "Congressman, I've talked to many people in your district, and they've told me you have a lot of farmers waiting for the crop-failure money in the president's budget." The lobbyist waited for a reaction from O'Rourke but got none. "If the budget doesn't pass, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes come next election."

O'Rourke looked at the man and pointed toward the door with his thumb. "I have work to do."

With the vote so close the lobbyist was not willing to give up easily. "Mr. O'Rourke, if you vote no on the president's budget, the American Farmers Association will be left with no other choice than to support your opponent next year."

O'Rourke shook his head and said, "Nice try, but I'm not running for a second term." Waving goodbye, the young congressman grabbed the door and closed it in the lobbyist's face. O'Rourke turned to face his secretary, Susan Chambers.

Susan smiled and said, "I'm sorry, Michael. I told them you had a full calendar, but they insisted on waiting around to see if you would fit them in."

"No apologies needed, Susan." Michael left the main reception area and walked into his office. He set his briefcase on the chair beside his desk and picked up a stack of pink messages. Yelling toward the door, he asked, "Has Tim come in yet?"

"No."

“Has he called?”

~~“Yes. He said that since there isn’t a snowball’s chance in hell of the president taking the funding for the Rural Electrification Administration out of the budget, he’s going to get some errands done and be in around one.”~~ Tim O’Rourke was Michael’s younger brother by two years and his chief of staff.

“I’m glad everyone is so positive around here.”

Susan stood up from behind her desk and walked to the doorway of O’Rourke’s office. “Michael and I are we’re only being realists. I admire that you’re trying to do what’s right, but the problem is, guys like you don’t win in Washington.”

“Well, thank you for your vote of confidence, Susan.”

Susan looked up into O’Rourke’s bloodshot eyes. “Michael, were you out again last night?” O’Rourke nodded his head yes. “This bachelor life is going to kill you. Why don’t you make an honest woman out of that adorable girlfriend of yours?”

O’Rourke had been hearing it from everyone lately, but he was in no position to get married. Maybe in another year... after he got out of Washington. He looked down and sighed, “Susan, I’m Irish, we tend to get married late in life. Besides, I’m not so sure she’ll have me.”

“That’s a lie and you know it. She adores you. Take it from a woman: I’ve seen the way she looks at you with those big brown eyes. You’re the one, so don’t screw it up. There aren’t too many like her out there.” Chambers slapped him in the stomach. “I hope being crowned the most eligible bachelor in Washington hasn’t gone to your head!”

O’Rourke frowned and shook his head. “Very funny, Susan.”

Chambers turned and walked away, laughing.

“I’m glad you’re getting such a kick out of this, Susan. Hold all of my calls. I have an appointment at noon, and until then I don’t want to be disturbed.”

“What if your grandfather or Liz calls?”

“No one, I don’t want to be disturbed.” O’Rourke shut the door and sat down behind his desk.

WHEN THE PRESIDENT ENTERED HIS OFFICE, he found Garret and his budget director, Ma Dickson, sitting on a couch by the fireplace, poring over the prospective vote count, trying to figure out whom they could sway to their side. Stevens knew his chief of staff was in a bad mood, and he did not have the energy for an argument. So he decided to defuse the situation and take orders. As he walked over to them, he took off his jacket, threw it on the other couch, and clapped his hands together. "All right, Stu, I'm all yours for the rest of the day. Just tell me what you want me to do."

Garret looked up and motioned for his boss to take a seat. Garret and Dickson had been in the office since 6 A.M., putting together a final list of possible holdouts. With one day to go, they had secured 200 votes. The opposition had 216 votes, and ten congressmen were still undecided. Garret had a piece of paper in front of him with two headings: UNDECIDED and POSSIBLE DEFECTORS. Ten names were under the undecided heading, and six under the possible-defectors heading. Both columns had shrunk considerably in the past week as the vote approached.

"All right, here's the current situation, Jim." No one but Stu Garret ever called the president by his first name. "We need to put this thing to bed today. Basset and Koslowski are up on the Hill playing good cop-bad cop with the fence-sitters. We're going to try and start a stampede by noon." Tom Basset was the Speaker of the House, and Jack Koslowski was the chairman of the House Appropriations Committee.

"Are we in a position to do that?" the president asked.

Garret leaned back in his chair, placed his hands behind his neck, and smiled. "Tom Basset has a meeting with Congressman Moore at eleven, and when that meeting is over, Frank Moore is going to make an announcement that he's backing the budget."

"How much is it going to cost us?" asked Dickson.

"Only about ten million."

"You guys are going to bag Frank Moore for ten million? That's nothing more than pocket change to Frank." The president shook his head. "How are you going to get him to settle for so little?"

Garret's smile emanated confidence. "We recruited some outside help to get him to see things our way."

"What kind of help?"

Garret paused for a long moment and replied flatly, "Arthur Higgins arranged to have some photos taken of the congressman and a certain young woman."

Arthur Higgins. There was no more mysterious name in all of Washington. Stevens seriously wondered whether it was in his best interest to know any details. Arthur Higgins was an ominous and legendary figure in the power circles of Washington and many of the world's other capitals. For forty years Higgins had run the most secretive branch of the CIA. Officially he never existed nor did he have a department. Higgins had been the author and controller of the Agency's most delicate and dangerous covert operations since the height of the cold war. Several years earlier he had been forced out of the CIA in a heated power struggle. What he had been doing with his time and talents since was something that was whispered about behind closed doors.

Stevens looked up from the paper and said, "You're going to blackmail Frank Moore?"

Garret smiled and said, "Essentially."

"I don't want to know the details, do I?"

"No." Garret shook his head. "Just trust me when I say Moore will see no other choice than to vote

our way.”

Stevens nodded solemnly and replied, “Next time, I would prefer it if you would let me know about these things before they’re set in motion.”

“Understood.” After a brief silence Garret turned their attention back to the task at hand. “Jim, I need to get you working on a couple of these possible defectors. Our staffers have been feeling these guys out and I think that two of the six will give us their vote if you promise not to back their opponent in the next election. Out of the ten undecideds and the six possible defectors, we’re going to have to get at least nine or the budget is dead, and if that happens, we may as well kiss next year’s election good-bye.”

“What about any possible defections from our side?” the president asked.

Garret leaned forward. “Don’t worry about that. If one of those little pricks steps out of line, Koslowski will cut every penny of federal money from their district. We’re not going to have any traitors.” Besides being chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, Jack Koslowski was the party’s chief neck-breaker on the Hill. He was known and feared by all as one of the roughest players in D.C. “What I need from you this morning are some real nice down-home phone calls to a couple of these rookie congressmen, telling them how much their vote would mean to you and the country. Maybe even invite them over here for lunch.”

The request was met with a grimace by the president, but Garret continued, “Jim, I know you don’t like mixing with the common folk, but if you don’t get a couple of these boys to switch over to our side, you’re going to have to do an awful lot of ass-kissing come election time.” Garret paused, giving the president time to reflect on unpleasant memories of the campaign trail. “If everything goes well with Moore, which I’m sure it will, I want to schedule a press conference at noon to try and spook the rest of these guys into settling. At the press conference I want you to stand up and complain about congressional gridlock. Tell them that you can’t start fixing this nation if they don’t pass your budget. You know the routine. I wrote a speech for you last night, and when we’re done with the phone calls, I want to run through it with you.” Garret hadn’t actually written the speech. One of his staffers had, but Garret was not one to give credit to others.

“How do you want him to respond if they start asking about us buying votes?” asked Dickson.

“Flat out deny it. Tell them that there are several congressmen who feel very strongly about getting certain kinds of economic relief to their districts, which are in dire need of help. Deny it, deny it, deny it. This thing will all be over in a couple of days, and then the press will move on to something else. If they start to lay into you about any frivolous parts of the bill, just squirm your way out of it, and then look at your watch and end the press conference. Tell them you have to meet some diplomats from one of the former Soviet republics.” Garret quickly jotted down a note to himself. “By the time you go on, I’ll have an excuse ready.”

The president nodded his head in a positive manner. He was a professional politician, and Garret was one of the best handlers in the business. He trusted Garret completely when it came to manipulating public opinion.

Garret stabbed his index finger at the list of congressmen. “All right, let’s stay focused on the game. We don’t give a shit what the press thinks, just so long as we get this budget passed.” Garret picked up a pen and circled three names under the possible-defectors heading. “Now, Jim, these three boys are as big hicks as they come. They’re a couple of Mr. Smith Goes to Washington types. Just like Jimmy Stewart in the movie. All three are freshmen and are full of ideals. If you call them up and beat the commander-in-chief drum, I think we can get them to jump sides. Give them the old ‘Rome wasn’t built in a day, we can’t save the nation overnight’ speech.” The president nodded his head, signaling a full understanding of the performance needed. “These next two guys are the ones I was telling you about. If we promise n

to back their opponents in the next election, they'll give us their votes. All they want is a person guarantee from you... they said they don't trust my word." Garret let out a loud laugh. "Can you imagine that?"

The president and Dickson joined in with smiles and a couple of chuckles. Garret pressed on. "No, this last rep is a real nut-bag, and I'm not so sure she'll play ball. Koslowski wanted her name on the list. She's from one of his neighboring districts in Chicago. She's a black freshman and she scares the shit out of me. She's a bona fide race-baiter. She'll call anyone a racist, and I mean anyone. She'd call the pope a racist if she had the chance. I think in exchange for her vote she's going to want to be invited to several high-profile events and be put on some of the more powerful committees. At which point she will stand up and call our biggest financial backers racists and embarrass the shit out of them. I would prefer to avoid having to deal with her if at all possible."

The president massaged his fingers. "Why is she on the list?"

"I told you, Jack put her on there just in case we need a vote at the last minute. We're not going to deal with her unless we absolutely have to. Now let's get started with the three rookies."

The first name at the top of the list was Michael O'Rourke. The president picked up his pen and stabbed the tip at O'Rourke's name. "Michael O'Rourke—where have I heard that name before?"

Garret looked over at his boss and shook his head. "I have no idea. He's a freshman independent from Minnesota." Garret glanced down at his notes. "He was on Senator Olson's staff before he was elected. He graduated from the University of Minnesota where he played hockey. After college he went into the Marine Corps and fought in the Gulf War. It says here he was leading a squad of Recon Marines behind enemy lines during the air war conducting target assessment when they saw a coalition pilot shot down. He and his men rushed to the pilot's aid and held off an entire company of Iraqi soldiers until the cavalry showed up. He was awarded the Silver Star."

The president continued to stare at the name and mumbled to himself, "I know I've heard that name before."

Mark Dickson interjected, "Sir, you may have read about him in the papers. He's recently been crowned the most eligible bachelor in Washington by the social columnists."

Stevens stabbed his pen down on the piece of paper several times. "You're right. That is where I've heard about him. I caught the secretaries swooning over his picture several weeks ago. Very handsome young man. We could probably use that to our advantage. What else do we know about him?"

Garret looked through some notes that an assistant had made for him. "He's thirty-two-years-old and from Grand Rapids. His family is big in the timber business." Garret raised his eyebrows when he looked at the estimated value of the O'Rourke Timber Company. "They've got some serious money. At any rate, he says he won't vote for your budget unless all of the funding for the Rural Electrification Administration is cut."

The president let out a loud laugh and asked, "That's the only thing he doesn't like about it?"

"No." Garret shook his head. "He says the whole thing sucks, but he's willing to sign on to it if, and only if, you cut the funding for the REA."

The president frowned at the word *sucks*. "That's ridiculous. We'd lose half the votes we already have and we wouldn't gain more than a handful."

"Exactly."

"Well, let's call him and find out just how serious he is when he's got the president of the United States breathing down his neck." Stevens pressed a button on his phone console. "Betty, would you please get Congressman O'Rourke on the line for me?"

"Yes, sir."

Stevens looked up from the phone. "What else can you tell me about him?"

~~"Not much. He's an unknown. I'm banking on the fact that once he hears your voice, he'll be in such a state of awe that he'll roll over like a good-old, smalltown boy."~~

O'Rourke was deep in thought when Susan's voice came over the intercom. He finished the sentence he was working on and pressed the intercom button. "Yes, Susan, what is it?"

"Michael, the president is holding on line one."

"Very funny, Susan. I told you I didn't want to be bothered. Please, tell the president I'm a little busy at the moment. I'll try to get back to him after lunch."

"Michael, I'm not kidding. The president is holding on line one."

O'Rourke laughed to himself. "Susan, are you that bored?"

"I'm serious, he's on line one."

O'Rourke frowned at the blinking light and pressed it. "Hello, this is Congressman O'Rourke."

The president was sitting behind his desk, and Stu Garret and Mark Dickson were listening in on the call from separate phones on the other side of the room. Upon hearing O'Rourke's voice, the president enthusiastically said, "Hello, Congressman O'Rourke?"

Michael leaned forward in his chair when he heard the president's familiar voice and said, "Yes, that is he."

"This is the president. How are you doing this morning?"

"Just fine, sir, and how are you?" O'Rourke closed his eyes and wished Susan would have listened to him.

"Well, I would be doing a whole lot better if I could get some of you people over there to back me on this budget."

"Yes, I'd imagine you would, sir." O'Rourke's monotone response was followed by a brief silence.

"You know, Congressman, that's a beautiful part of the country you're from. One of my roommates at Dartmouth had a little cabin up near Grand Rapids. I spent a week there one summer and had a fantastic time. That is, with the exception of those darn mosquitoes. They could pick you up and carry you off during the middle of the night if you weren't careful."

"Yes, they're pretty bad at times." O'Rourke had yet to show an ounce of emotion in his voice.

The president pressed on, speaking as if he and O'Rourke had been friends for years. "Well, Michael, the reason I'm calling is to tell you that I really need your vote tomorrow. And before you tell me yes or no, I want to talk to you about a couple of things.

"I've been doing this for over twenty-five years now, and I remember when I was a freshman representative. I came here filled with piss and vinegar. I was going to change this place... I was going to make a difference. Well, I quickly realized that if I didn't learn to take the good with the bad, I was never going to get anything done. I've been there, Michael. I know what you're going through.

"I remember the first presidential budget I had to vote on. There were some things in that budget that made me want to vomit. I vowed to fight it, until some of the older guys pulled me aside and pointed out that there would never be a budget that I would completely agree with. I took another look at it, and then after a closer review, I realized that I agreed with about eighty percent of the stuff that was in there.

"Michael, there are four hundred and thirty-five members in the House of Representatives. There's no way I will ever be able to send a budget up there that everyone agrees with. Now, I know you wanted the REA disbanded, and to be honest, I've wanted to kill the damn program for the past twenty years, but we're in a goddamned war here, Michael. If I torpedo the REA, my budget will be sunk faster than

the *Titanic*. I agree with you in theory. The REA has to go, but in the real world if I want to pass all the other things that will help make this country a better place to live, I have to make some compromise. And the REA is one of those ugly things I have to let slide, so we can achieve what is best for the country.”

The president paused for effect, and O'Rourke offered no response.

“Michael, do you understand the position I'm in? I will never be able to present a budget that will make everybody happy. I need you to ask yourself if you're being realistic.... I'm up here taking the heat. I'm running the show, and if this budget doesn't get passed, I will be severely hampered in my ability to put this country back on its feet. I'm asking you for a big favor.... I was in your shoes once before.... I need you to ignore the twenty percent that you don't like and help me pass this budget. If you come on board, Michael, I can guarantee that you'll go a long way in politics.” Stevens paused to give O'Rourke some time to think of the ways the president of the United States could help his career. “What do you say, Michael? Can I count on your vote tomorrow?”

There was a long, awkward silence as O'Rourke sat in his office and cursed himself for taking the call. He did not want to get into a debate with the president right now. So, true to his typical form, he cut straight to the heart of the matter. “Mr. President, there is very little that I like about your budget. My vote will be no tomorrow, and there is nothing that will change that. I'm sorry to have wasted your time by accepting this call.” Without waiting for a response, O'Rourke hung up.

THE PRESIDENT SAT IN DISBELIEF BEHIND HIS desk, staring at the phone. He looked over Garret and asked, "Did he just hang up on me?"

"The guy must be an idiot. He's definitely not going to be around this town for long. Don't let him bother you. I'll have Koslowski take care of him." Garret rose and started to walk toward the door. "I'll be right back. I have to get something from my office. Mark, get him started on the calls to Dreyer and Hampton. Jim, all they want is a verbal guarantee from you that you won't back their opponents in next year's election. I'll be back in five minutes."

Garret walked down the hallway, ignoring all in his path. He entered his office, closed the door, and headed straight for his desk. Before grabbing the phone, he picked up a pack of Marlboro 100s and shoved one in his mouth. After lighting it, he took two deep drags and filled his lungs. The president wouldn't allow Garret to smoke in the Oval Office, so he tended to find an excuse about every hour to sneak away to his office. He picked up the handset of his phone and punched in the number for the direct line to Jack Koslowski's office.

A gruff voice answered the phone on the other end. "Yeah."

"Jack, Stu here. How are things going?"

"We're holding the line. No one is going to break ranks on this one. All we need is for you boys and Tom to come through."

"We both know Tom will have Moore delivered to us by noon, but we need some people to jump ship from the other side."

"Who do you have in mind?"

"For starters I need you to lean on this O'Rourke clown. The president just tried to give him the so-called shoe and it went over like a lead balloon. Stevens gave him a five-minute speech and then O'Rourke hung up on him."

"You're shitting me. He hung up on Stevens?" Koslowski started to laugh.

Garret did not think it was funny. "Lean on him hard, and if there's anyone else you can think of, we need them by noon."

"I'll put my boys on the street and see what I can do. I'll let you know as soon as I find anything out. Both men hung up."

Congressman O'Rourke was sitting at his desk, reading over some documents and dictating notes when the door to his office burst open. A slender, well-dressed man, who looked vaguely familiar, pushed his way past Susan and approached Michael's desk.

In an irritated voice Susan said, "I'm sorry, sir, but I told this man that you weren't taking visitors this morning."

The man stepped forward. "I apologize for the intrusion, Congressman O'Rourke, but I'm one of Chairman Koslowski's aides. He has a proposal he would like you to consider, and he needs an answer immediately."

Michael leaned back in his chair and realized where he'd seen the dark-haired man before. Michael's gaze turned from the aide to his secretary. "Thank you, Susan, I'll see the gentleman." Susan retreated from the office and closed the door. The chairman's aide stepped forward and extended his hand across the desk. O'Rourke remained seated and took the man's hand.

"Congressman O'Rourke, my name is Anthony Vanelli."

O'Rourke placed his Dictaphone on the desk behind several stacks of files and said, "Please take

seat, Mr. Vanelli.” O’Rourke had heard several stories about the aide and doubted this would be a friendly visit.

Vanelli sat down in one of the chairs in front of O’Rourke’s desk and crossed his legs. “Congressman O’Rourke, I’ve been sent here to find out if you’re still going to vote against the president’s budget, and if you are, what we can do to change your mind.”

“Mr. Vanelli, I assume you know I spoke to the president this morning.”

“I am fully aware of that, Congressman O’Rourke, but time is running short and we need to know who is standing with us and who is standing against us.”

O’Rourke leaned forward and placed his elbows on the desk. “Well, Mr. Vanelli, I have made my position very clear from the start. I will vote no for the budget unless the president cuts all funding for the Rural Electrification Administration.”

“All right, Congressman, let’s cut to the chase. We live in the real world, and in the real world, the Rural Electrification Administration is going to continue to exist. It’s just the way things operate around here. You have to try to get over the little things and concentrate on the big picture. You can’t damn the whole budget just because you don’t like one little part of it.”

“Mr. Vanelli, I would hardly consider a half billion dollars little. The thing you people don’t understand is that I consider most of the president’s budget to be a waste. I am merely focusing on the Rural Electrification Administration because it’s an easy target. You must agree with the simple logic that when an institution is founded to solve a problem, once that problem is solved, the institution should be closed. All of rural America has been electrified for over twenty years, but we continue to bleed the taxpayers for about five hundred million dollars a year, just so congressmen and senators can send pocket money back to their constituents. It’s a crime that the president is predicting a one-hundred-billion-dollar budget deficit and garbage like this isn’t being cut.” O’Rourke looked down to make sure the Dictaphone was still running.

Vanelli stood from his chair and walked toward the other end of the office. “They told me you were a flake,” he said over his shoulder.

O’Rourke smiled to himself as he looked at Vanelli’s back and said, “Excuse me. What did you just say?”

Vanelli turned around and strutted back to the desk. “Enough of the bullshit, Mike. I’m not here to talk political theory with you, nor to discuss what is ethically correct. That’s for people like you and your loser friends to waste time on.”

“Mr. Vanelli, I don’t remember giving you permission to call me by my first name.”

“Listen, Mike, Mikey, or dickhead, I’ll call you whatever I want. All you are is a naive little freshman congressman who thinks he has all the solutions. We’re about the same age, but we’re worlds apart. I’m a realist and you’re an idealist. Do you know where idealists get in this town? Nowhere! They get absolutely nowhere! They sent me down here to give you one last chance. You either get on board with the president’s budget or your career is over. The choice is simple. You help us out and Chairman Koslowski will make sure some extra money finds its way into your district. If you don’t, you’ll be out of a job next year.”

O’Rourke looked up at the man standing over his desk and rose to meet the challenge. The six-foot-three, 210-pound O’Rourke smiled slightly and asked, “Mr. Vanelli, what exactly do you mean, my career will be over?”

Vanelli took a step backward and replied, “You either play ball with us or we’ll ruin your career. Chairman Koslowski will make sure he cuts off every penny from getting to your district. We’ve got a lot of people right now who are digging through your past. If we find anything dirty, we’ll spread it all over

town, and if we don't, we'll make something up. We own enough people in the press. We could ruin you in a week. We're done playing nice guy." Vanelli shook his finger in O'Rourke's face. "I'm going to wait in your lobby for exactly five minutes. I want you to sit in here and think about having your career ruined over one stupid vote, and when you're done, I want an answer." Vanelli turned for the door.

O'Rourke reached forward and grabbed the Dictaphone with his left hand. He took his thumb and pressed the rewind button. The tiny machine started to squeak as the tape spun in reverse. Vanelli heard the familiar sound and turned to look. Michael held up the tiny machine and pressed play. Vanelli's voice emanated from the small box. "We've got people right now who are digging through your past. If we find anything dirty, we'll spread it all over town, and if we don't, we'll make something up. We own enough people in the press. We could ruin you in a week."

Vanelli stormed across the room and lunged for the Dictaphone. "Who the hell do you think you are?"

O'Rourke's right hand shot up and grabbed Vanelli's outstretched hand. O'Rourke had practiced the judo move thousands of times while he was in the Marines. In one quick motion he twisted Vanelli's hand until the bottom of the wrist faced the ceiling, then forced the hand back toward the elbow. Vanelli collapsed to his knees in pain. O'Rourke continued to exert enough force to keep him on the floor.

Vanelli looked up with a pained face and screeched, "Let go of my fucking wrist, and give me the goddamn tape." O'Rourke increased the pressure and Vanelli let out a squeal.

"Listen to me, Vanelli. Just because you're from Chicago and you have an Italian name doesn't mean you're tough. You're an aide to a congressman, not a hit man for the Mafia."

Vanelli picked up his right hand and reached for his bent wrist. Before he was halfway there O'Rourke slammed the wrist back another inch and Vanelli's free hand shot back to the floor as he let out a scream.

"Listen to me, you little punk! I don't know who you think you are coming in here and threatening me, but if you or your scumbag boss ever bother me again, you'll have the FBI, *60 Minutes*, and every other major news organization in the country crawling up your ass. Do you understand?" Vanelli was slow to respond, so O'Rourke increased the pressure and repeated the question. "Do you understand?" Vanelli shook his head yes and started to whimper. O'Rourke set the tape recorder on his desk, dropped to one knee, and grabbed Vanelli by the chin. He stared into his eyes and in a firm, precise voice said, "If you ever screw with me again, I'll do a hell of a lot more than twist your wrist."

Garret came bursting into the Oval Office. He'd been running back and forth between his office and the president's all morning, sneaking puffs of cigarettes and screaming into his phone. He strutted across the room to where the president and Dickson were sitting. "I've got great news; Moore is on board." The president punched his fist into the air, and all three men let out a yell.

"Jim, I think we should postpone the press conference until one P.M."

"Stu, you know I hate postponing those things. It's just going to make us look like we're unorganized."

Garret grabbed a fresh piece of paper and leaned over the table. He wrote the number 209 in the upper left-hand corner and 216 in the upper right. "We were at two hundred and nine votes versus two hundred sixteen this morning. Since then we've picked up Moore, Reiling, and one of those hicks. They were all undecided, and we got Dreyer and Hampton to defect. That's minus two for them and plus five for us. That puts us at two hundred fourteen apiece." Garret stood up and screamed, "God, I love the tension. We're going to win this damn thing." The president and Dickson smiled.

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