

Epilogue Two

July 10, Wednesday.

White House.

President Robert Jenkins sat at the Resolute Desk thinking back over the last month.

After the horror of standing in the Tank and watching the pulsing white lights over the volcanic targets, half expecting to see those lights mushroom into massive explosions, nothing happened. There was silence in the room broken only by the sounds of a gurney being lifted with the corpse of the President on it. Everyone was transfixed, even those who knew that the displays would not change.

Admiral Olsen was the first to move calling her boss, CNC Seventh Fleet, on her direct secure line. The Fleet was steaming away from Indonesia at flank speed. In the early dawn darkness, however, they might have seen or heard the eruption. She turned to the President. "Nothing observed by the Fleet, sir."

Jenkins closed his eyes. What was happening to Patty right now? Had she been awoken to a cataclysmic nightmare of nuclear and volcanic eruption, hot, molten, radioactive air pouring down on her. Was she alive? Dead? In agony?

The Secretary of State had also been on the phone and got through to the duty officer at the Consulate just fifty miles away from Mt Semeru. If Semeru was erupting it would be seen and heard from Surabaya.

He shook his head as Robert enquired. "There is a massive thunderstorm. I could hardly hear the duty officer. He said it blew up in the last few minutes and he has never seen anything so spectacular at this hour of the day. It could be caused by the volcano."

Robert had slumped into his Vice President's chair and held his head in his hands.

Fogarty spoke. "Perhaps I could be the first to congratulate you, Mister President. It seems you might have started the planet on the path to recovery."

Robert felt pure unbridled hatred. "Get out! Get out!" He turned to the Secret Service person who had rushed into the room when the President collapsed. "Get him out. Lock him up."

General Sanchez was speaking to a console operator who brought up a satellite image, zooming in on Mt Tambora to the east of Java. "Sir, there are no storms over Tambora. All appears to be quiet." Robert looked intently.

"What about the other one?" Fingers flew on keyboards and the image shifted west. The lightning flashes over Surabaya could be seen from space. Sanchez used his laser pointer and highlighted an area to the south, on the edge of the storm. "This is the target area, sir. It appears quiet."

Robert could not help himself and quietly wept. The others averted their eyes in silence. Embarrassed Robert recovered quickly.

"I must get back to the White House and make an announcement to the nation about the tragic loss of our President." His new Head of Detail was already at the door, hand held close to his face calling for the President's motorcade, clearing the route back to the White House.

From that point Robert presided over two weeks of mourning for the fallen President. While the nation mourned, Robert did not. The mandatory autopsy had found the Presidential arteries so severely clogged he was lucky to have lived as long as he did. Blood was found on his neck at the site of bruising,

but no suspicion was attached. Everyone knew the Vice President had desperately sought a pulse, and in the circumstances and stress probably pressed hard enough to bruise the President's neck. Only Robert knew he had real blood on his hands. Laurel, when informed of the death of her husband, had the forethought, before rushing to the hospital, to replace all the President's medications with the correct dosages and flush the replacements away. In the end, there was no reason to investigate.

After addressing the nation at 6pm, just two hours after the President had been announced dead, Robert summarily sacked Cameron Wright, had his personal belongings packed up and sent to his home. Over the weekend he asked for and received resignations from all the Probin appointees who had only ever done what the deceased President wanted. In Robert's view, they had defiled their constitutional oaths, placing allegiance to a man above allegiance to their country and constitution.

On the Saturday morning Robert was emotionally and physically drained but took his place in the Oval Office. His Head of Detail discreetly asked as he escorted Robert into the building, "What is the charge you want brought against Professor Fogarty, sir? He is still locked up in the Treasury Building."

Robert had forgotten. Could he charge him? Highly unlikely. "Let him go. Tell him I want to save the nation the expense and publicity of a fraud and treason charge at this solemn moment in our history."

He heard over the following weeks that Fogarty moved out of his small apartment and in with the unemployed ex Chief of Staff. They deserved each other as far as he was concerned, not knowing the true relationship between them.

Now from his seat at the famous desk, a faint smile played across his face as he surveyed the remodeled Oval Office. Gone were the bright and garish colors of his predecessor, replaced by the subdued and, he thought, Presidential hues of a Christian conservative. He gave an expansive, satisfied sigh as he recalled the best part of the last month.

The Sunday after he had become President, he received a brief message from Patty. None of the usual greetings just "Congratulations Dad. Beware what you wish for." It finished with a heart emoticon and a wry smiley face. Robert thought that was a good start. He had responded to the text equally briefly. "Not a good way to become President! I love you. Let's talk." He added numerous emojis to emphasize his love and affection. From that small beginning they had exchanged a few more texts, then emails. Robert found out she was about to take up a six-month contract at a children's hospital in Surabaya. He asked her to make a visit to the US Consulate in Surabaya where they could hold a secure video conversation. To his immense relief she agreed, and he had it arranged.

The call started tentatively, both of them obviously wary and hurting. Robert knew he would only get one chance to regain his daughter's trust and embarked on what he thought was a high-risk strategy. He was going to place himself between his daughter and her love life.

"Sweetheart, there is much I cannot tell you about the last few weeks but one thing I must tell you, even if it means you never speak to me again." Patty's face took on a solemn expression. "You see, for weeks now I have been trying to prevent Angus Probin from embarking on a highly dangerous plan, one that Sampson had proposed and which even I thought was good to start with. Then I found out a few things. Did you know Sampson is not a professor?"

"News to me."

“Did you know he is more than forty years old?”

Patty frowned. “No, he is not. He is only thirty-three.”

“Sorry my sweet, I’ve seen his birth certificate. He changed his name to Sampson Fogarty by deed poll after he was released from prison in California, where he served time for assault. His birth name is Samuel Falkowski and he is forty-two years old.”

Patty’s look had gone from one of bemusement to anger, her jaw clenched.

“Why are you telling me this, Dad? Is it to poison our relationship? Is it even true?”

“Patty, I swear on the Lord’s name, I am telling you the truth.” Patty knew not to doubt that. Robert was glad she had not seen him make a similar oath to the deceased President.

“Hmmm. That explains a few things for me,” said Patty. “Sampson called me a week or so ago with some crazy scheme for me to drop everything and join him at a conference in Brisbane, Australia. It was just after I left MSF so I couldn’t have gone anyway, but it didn’t sound right. In fact, I found it was complete bullshit – sorry Dad – there was no conference. I think he knows I caught him in a lie.” She later sent him a copy of her text to Fogarty. Robert thought it was probably not the first relationship to be ended by a text message, but it was the best Dear John he had ever read.

Robert had felt great relief and decided to chance his arm. “I have a request to make, my sweet.”

Patty tilted her head inquisitively. “Don’t ask me to come home, Dad. I start work in Surabaya next week and intend to be here at least until the end of the contract. Then maybe I will reassess.”

“No. No. I DO want you to come home but only for a flying visit before you take up your new job. You see, I am having a small celebration to mark my elevation to the Presidency. In the circumstances it must be muted and low key, so it will be private White House dinner with my Cabinet and appointees, some senior party officials and, I hope, with my very beautiful daughter on my arm.”

Patty looked disappointed. “Daddy, I would love to, but I just can’t. I don’t have the funds to fly home.”

“I know that, my love. Please swallow that stubborn independence of yours just this once and let me bring you home. If it makes you feel better, write out an IOU.”

“I don’t have anything to wear.” Robert knew he had won, and sure enough Patty flew home AND let him buy her a new outfit.

A discreet knock came on the door leading to his private dining room. Barbara Collins, retired Colonel and now Presidential Chief of Staff peered around it. “Come in Barbara. I’ve told you before, you don’t need to knock. You have open door access.”

“I know sir, but military protocols are hard to shake.”

She came in and took a seat opposite him. Robert had been impressed by the quiet efficiency of Collins during the harrowing final minutes trying to abort Volcanic Winter. Since appointing her as his Chief of Staff she had not disappointed. Not only was she efficient she had one of the best “BS detectors” as she called it, often calling out people or situations to him in private. This was invaluable to Robert who lacked such talents and tended to believe the story that sounded best at the time.

Now she was here to give him a rundown on how the Senate confirmation hearings were going for his new appointees to Cabinet positions.

“You’ll be pleased to know that Dr Turner sailed through the hearings with bi-partisan support and has been confirmed as Environment Secretary. The senators are going hard on Ruth Lewis for Treasury, but she should get through OK. I think Mr Robinson, the retired Admiral is well respected, and he too should have no problems getting through the hearings for Defence Secretary. I’m not sure how long he will want the job for though, seems like he was enjoying retirement. I think Madame Yao will struggle. There is enough prejudice in the Senate to oppose a Chinese American at any time. The fact that she has not Americanized her name has some of your own party suggesting she is working for the Chinese and is a big mistake for the role of Secretary of State. She can give as good as she takes though, so let’s just wait and see.”

“May I ask, sir, how the new Vice President is settling in?”

“So far so good. She moved into my old residence on the weekend and I was able to show her and Jacques around the place.”

“Yes, I heard she moved in. Has your move gone well?”

“Huh, I really haven’t had much time to settle. At least the commute is easy!” he laughed. “You know the VP mansion was a lonely place for a bachelor and this house is little better. At least living here, I can work as many long hours as I want without having to worry about keeping drivers and Secret Service waiting around. I hope Patty will move in after what has happened in Indonesia but right now it is not a conversation I can have with her. She is too worried and annoyed.”

As he spoke, he felt a tingle of anticipation. Tonight, the previous First Lady, still in mourning, would come to the Residence to show him around and have dinner. Robert hoped for much more but realized that any public demonstration of their affection and growing relationship would have to wait, probably at least until after the election. He intended to have her on his re-election team which would surprise few, give them opportunities to spend time together and perhaps, sometime after the election, they could declare their growing romance, fueled on the election trail.

Collins interrupted his reverie, noting the faint smile on her new boss’ face and misinterpreting the reason.

“One more thing, sir, before you have to go to the NSC meeting. Two more polls have been published overnight and you continue to enjoy high popularity. I think the people see that you mean to make changes for the better and not be stuck with outdated policies based on feelings and belief rather than science and action.” It was a long speech for the taciturn Collins. She knew she had to tread carefully, knowing that many of Robert’s convictions were based on belief rather than fact. She was still finding her way and wanted to know what worked with this President and what he would be offended by.

The smile remained on his face as he looked at the poll results she slid across the desk.

Robert had hoped to be seen as taking immediate action when, within weeks of his ascension to the office of President, he announced with much fanfare his government’s plans to paint America White. Some Climate Change activists saw the merit and sang faint praise. Many of his own party ridiculed it, but only behind closed doors. The phrase Make America White Again had gained in popularity with far-right groups. In general, the country had stood behind

President Jenkins and he was enjoying popularity ratings double that of his predecessor.

Despite the country heading into peak hurricane season, no natural disaster of any sort had assaulted the country in the brief period of his Presidency. Robert believed this was in answer to his prayers. Seeing the poll results led him to give thanks to the Lord rather than heed the words of his Chief of Staff.

As she gathered up her papers the Chief of Staff glanced at the desk clock. "The Security Council should be assembled by now, sir, for the emergency meeting you called. The Senate has agreed to release Secretary Designate Turner from its hearings, so he will be attending as you requested."

Robert looked out the window hoping to see the bright light of a sunny summer day but saw the ominous orange, muted light that had first started with the sky whitening a week ago. For a few days the country witnessed spectacular sunrises and sunsets but in daytime these were replaced by that ominous light, similar to that which often precedes a summer storm. It was the one cloud on his otherwise clear horizon.

"Thanks Barbara," he said with a sigh. "I guess I better head to it. It's in the Situation Room, right?"

"Correct, sir."

July 10, Wednesday, 10.30 am.

White House Situation Room.

Robert entered the Situation Room passing through and between the occupied desks of the duty staff. Through long training none of them rose to acknowledge his passage, remaining absorbed in their tasks. He entered the secure meeting room to be met by the rustle of his NSC members rising to greet him. Dr Gregg Turner stood at the back of the room near two large screens. One had a series of satellite pictures on it broken into a flat screen projection of the world. A wavy, brownish smear could be seen across the middle of the display, darker in the longitudes of Indonesia and South East Asia, lightening as it spread east and west towards the Americas and Europe. It extended from the equator northward, reaching north as far as China and North America. Last time Robert had seen this image was two days ago when the smear had not completed a full circle around the globe. Now its east and west extensions joined over Greenland.

He waved the NSC members to their seats and started with no preamble.

"Ladies and gentlemen, as you well know the world is in the midst of a potential catastrophe. If we thought global warming was the number one concern of nations, it has now taken a back seat. We may have to confront the reality of an impending ice age. I have asked Dr Turner to brief the Council on the eruption of Mount Tambora in Sumbawa, Indonesia, two weeks ago. Those of you who do not know the Secretary Designate, he is a distinguished Climate Scientist and an advisor to the Smithsonian Volcanology Project. He is also my friend and choice to become Secretary of the Environment." Robert smiled at Gregg. "Please brief the Council, Gregg."

"Thanks, Mr President. When you asked me to join your cabinet three weeks ago, I did not expect my duties would be to prepare for global cooling." He smiled. "If I had, I might have refused your offer." Nervous laughter came from the others at the table.

“Ladies and gentlemen, the earth is being plunged into what as is known as Volcanic Winter.” He looked at Robert. Only the President and he knew about the attempt to create Volcanic Winter with nuclear weapons. “It is not the first time. We have enough evidence from previous occasions to be able to predict that we are probably heading for a mass extinction event. It is a little less than two weeks since Mt Tambora erupted with a Volcanic Explosive Index, or VEI of eight. That is like an earthquake at nine on the Richter scale. The death toll in Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand, and Myanmar exceeds five hundred thousand people and will probably rise to more than a million as earthquakes continue to devastate the region and generate tsunamis.”

He brought up a video on the other screen taken from an aircraft. “This video was downloaded from a United Nations surveillance aircraft a week ago, shortly before it was lost without a trace. It shows very clearly the massive crater that is the new Mt Tambora caldera. We have measured it at twelve miles east to west and eight miles north to south. What once was Mt Tambora is now a vast new volcanic crater. The original mountain has lost its top one third. Tambora last erupted in 1815 and is one of the eruptions that scientists have been able to glean information from. We know that it caused global cooling in the years after its last eruption. This eruption is on a much larger scales, similar to a quarter mile wide asteroid hitting the earth. Regrettably, that is not the only part of the story. Tambora has triggered ongoing earthquakes along the Rim of Fire to the west of it. The Indonesians are evacuating towns and villages around Mt Semeru in East Java, as they expect Mt Semeru may erupt sympathetically with equal force. The major city of Surabaya lies just seventy miles north of Semeru, much of it in ruins from earthquakes which is hampering the Indonesian’s evacuations.”

Turner gestured at the world map. “You all will have noticed the effect of this spreading ash and debris cloud now circling the globe. It is not our problem and it will dissipate over the next few weeks. You cannot see our problem. It is the invisible aerosols released by the eruption which have entered the stratosphere and are being spread by stratospheric winds. These will linger for many years and reflect solar radiation back into space. The result will be, over the next few years, a rapid cooling of the planet.”

The Secretary of Agriculture who had been invited to attend though not a regular member of the NSC, interrupted. “So, Dr Turner, why the doom and gloom? Our farmers are going to love this. If we lose a couple of degrees of temperature, we can go back to the bumper crops and agriculture of last century. With modern techniques and chemicals our agricultural output can double, our exports will be huge, particularly if we have to feed a lot of displaced people. The UN can pay.”

The Director of Homeland Security chipped in. “Does this mean the oceans will cool, Gregg? Less hurricanes, less intense hurricanes?”

“I think that is likely,” agreed Gregg.

“So, there is a silver lining?” stated the Director of Homeland Security.

Before Gregg could agree or disagree Robert spoke up. “Ladies and gentlemen, you are already getting to the crux of this matter. Dr Turner will explain in depth why we are at the point of impending disaster. He will explain the mass extinctions of many species, possibly a halving of human population with massive uncontrolled migrations, wars as borders are violated, new natural disasters to replace the ones we have now. When he is finished you will all realize not only is this the most tragic event that has ever hit humanity, it is an

opportunity for the United States. We will suffer as will every nation. Only the fittest will survive and thrive.”

He paused for effect

“I intend the fittest to be Americans.”