

Chapter Eight

"Would you get that, honey?" the senator asked, when the private line rang in his office.

"Sure," Connie Raymond, the senator's twenty-nine year old, shapely, blond wife replied. She quickly chewed and swallowed the chocolate covered strawberry that she had been toying with, rose from the velvet couch and trotted to her husband's mahogany paneled office. "Senator Raymond's residence," she announced, "how can I help you? Hello, hello?"

"Who was that?" the senator asked, as he exited the downstairs bathroom, his prominent biceps flexing as he tossed a towel over his shoulder.

"I don't know, they hung up when I answered."

"That's strange ... probably a wrong number."

Thirty minutes later, while seated at his desk in his undershorts, reviewing a colleague's legislative proposal, the phone rang once again.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Have you come to a decision?" an unfamiliar voice asked.

"Who is this?"

"A messenger," the dark, emotionless voice replied.

"From whom?"

"Time is of essence, we need a decision."

"What decision?" the senator asked, as the caller hung up.

He slowly lowered the telephone while thinking, who the hell was that and what decision could he have been alluding to? Wait a minute, that son of a bitch Perry, I bet it was his doing. But wouldn't he have just picked up the phone and called me himself? If that's what the call was about, however, it's beginning to scare me.

The following morning, while stopped in traffic, the senator lifted his cell phone and dialed. "Perry, this is ..."

"I know who you are," Perry said, cutting him short, "I've been expecting your call."

"I believe that I heard from your messenger last night," the senator said, angrily.

"Are you free for lunch?"

"I asked you a question!"

"Not now, later."

"Alright, between one and two."

"I'll be waiting at the curb outside your office at one sharp. Look for a silver BMW sedan."

I didn't like the sound of last night's call, the senator thought, as he sat at his desk surrounded by the day's business. Damn, that Perry is a bastard and how in hell did he get my home number? But if he thinks that I'm going to sponsor a bill with questionable merit and then be left holding the bag when it tanks, he's nuts!

Unable to concentrate on anything other than his upcoming meeting, he repeatedly checked the time on the old grandfather clock that stood in one corner of his office. At twelve forty-five, he rose and headed for the street.

From behind the building's dark glass side door, he could see Perry's BMW sitting at the curb. Not wishing to be seen entering the vehicle, he waited for the sidewalk to clear of pedestrians. Once convinced of his anonymity, he passed through the exit and walked briskly towards the car and entered.

"Buckle up, we are going for a ride," Perry said.

"I don't feel comfortable meeting like this," the senator replied, as he searched for the seatbelt latch.

"Why is that?"

"I thought we were going for lunch at a public place?"

"What we have to discuss can and should not be said in public. The car is safe, it was electronically swept by my people before I left."

"So, I guess lunch is out of the question?"

"In the back seat, the picnic basket."

The senator turned slightly and, catching a glimpse of the wicker container, asked, "Was last night's call made at your direction?"

"Not exactly."

"What does that mean?"

"I too have superiors to whom I must answer. The call was their way of getting your attention."

"Well, it was hardly a scholarly or congenial approach," the senator said, with a sideways glance.

"Let me be chillingly honest," Perry sneered, "my superiors are not the scholarly type, if you get my drift."

"I'm afraid so," the senator remarked, indignantly, "and I will not have anything to do with that sort."

"I understand, your freshman status, reputation and all, however, whether you like it or not you are already involved."

Perry took the scenic route that circumvents San Francisco, pulling to the curb and stopping when he had reached a beachfront area. Releasing his seatbelt, he reached for the picnic basket, transferred it to the front seat and precariously balanced it upon the center console. "Help yourself," Perry said, "there are a few Chardonnay splits and an assortment of sandwiches."

"From the tone of your conversation, I had half expected the basket to be hiding a silenced weapon," the senator replied, with some relief.

"Well, that might be the approach of some," Perry added, with a wink, "but not mine."

As the motorized windows dropped to their sills, the senator took a deep breath of the cleansing ocean air and gazed down at the shrimp salad sandwich nestled in his left hand. He lifted it towards his mouth, about to take a bite and then hesitated. "I've given considerable thought to your request," he said, "I just don't see how I can mandate the demise of an entire industry, especially one whose purpose is to help out indebted populace."

"I understand your conceptual conflict," Perry responded, while washing down a mouthful of bread with the remainder of his split, "that is, given your liberal party affiliation, however, you must see our position."

"I do and that's the problem."

"How so?"

"I feel threatened."

"Threatened?" Perry exclaimed, with a quizzical expression, "well, every action and lack thereof can have its own set of, shall we say, unintended consequences."

"I'm sure," the senator remarked, while dabbing a bead of sweat with his napkin, "that you are aware of the consequences associated with threatening an elected official?"

"Why can't you simply view this as a workable symbiotic relationship?"

"Are you serious?"

"Look, my superiors and our industry in general, have a great deal of influence on the political scene and can benefit you greatly."

"What if I agree to your demands and the bill fails, what happens to me then?"

"It won't fail, after all, how do you think the new bankruptcy legislation and the IRS non-profit purge got its start?"

"And how do you propose I sell it to my party and constituents?"

"Easy, we will help you from behind the scenes."

"Help me, how?"

"We'll feed the media whatever's necessary to paint a bleak picture of the debt consolidation industry."

"How are you going to do that when they have already established themselves as the public's only way out of debt?"

"Simple, we get the talking heads to start a campaign to reveal the enormous profits that these companies are reaping from their poor, debt strapped clients."

"But these are, for the most part, non-profit corporations?"

"C'mon, senator, even joe six-pack knows that non-profit status is nothing more than a tax dodge."

"I don't know ..."

"Look, artfully presented, you could come off as a modern day Robin Hood."

"But Robin Hood was a criminal."

"I'm certain you got my point."

"It's the concept that I'm having trouble with," the senator said, while shaking his head, "especially in light of that threatening phone call."

"I had no part in that."

"Alright, then I want the name of whomever's responsible."

"You know I can't do that."

"No I don't, explain it to me."

"It wouldn't be safe."

"For you or me?"

"Both of us."

"Well, then I guess the ball is in my court," the senator declared, while checking the time on his wristwatch, "I can't give you an answer right now but I promise to give it front burner attention."

Lifting the small bottle, Perry finished off the last drop of his Chardonnay and turned the ignition key. "Don't screw this up," he said, while making a *U* turn, "you have no idea where it could lead."