

THE OTHER PRESIDENT

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This novel is dedicated to the memory of Ron Bissell, Conrad Montana

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CHAPTER ONE

What if I just walk away from being President of the United States? Maybe then the dreams will stop, thought Sam Wainwright. After all, in a recent survey only half the country knew who he was anyway

Sam stood at the middle oval window of the White House Blue Room wearing bikini-style Jockey briefs, his skin still wet from the nightmare. He surveyed the darkness of the South Lawn, but couldn't help noticing the sweet-smelling aftershave lotion of the Secret Service agent.

"It was bad this time, wasn't it Luke?" Sam said without turning around.

"Yes, Mr. President it was."

"The White House was under attack again, Luke, just like the embassy in Saigon."

"You're a lot safer here, Mr. President."

Sam turned to look at Luke Parker, rocking back and forth on his heels, waiting for his President to go back upstairs and get some shuteye.

"That's what the CIA told me in Saigon, Luke."

"We'll make shredded wheat of anyone that comes over the fence, Mr. President. You know that."

Sam wasn't listening. He could still see the North Vietnamese sappers popping out of the ground like mechanical targets. He could still hear the screams of men and women wearing evening clothes begging for their lives, the dull thud of single-pistol shots, the rapid sound of AK-47 rounds. Phosphorous hand grenades exploding like a Fourth of July celebration gone amuck.

In Sam's nightmare it was the Saigon embassy one moment, and the White House the next. There was no real sense of place, just terror.

Sam, of course, was the first to acknowledge that he had other problems with being President than just his safety. He often wondered if he was the only politician to ever hate being President of the United States? He had never wanted the responsibility, or ever dreamed he would have it.

"Get some sleep," Sam said to Parker as he headed for the stair case. As he got to the top of the steps, Sam turned around. Parker was still there, watching him.

The next morning, Sam's doubts about the security of the White House grounds forced him to confide to Luke Parker that he didn't think it was just a bad-dream problem.

The response he got from Parker was predictable: Although terrorist attacks around the world had increased dramatically, particularly against symbols of American power like embassies, they could never get on the White House grounds. The attackers would be pulverized. It was that old *never could happen--again*.

The head of the Secret Service detail may have thought his explanation would suffice, but was told in no uncertain terms by Sam that he wanted a plan for his survival that was based on the White House being overrun by terrorists. Not being *attacked* by terrorists, mind you, but being *overrun--* meaning this President was still standing around when the attackers were coming through the door. Maybe even while he was taking a leak. Or talking politics at a state dinner. Whatever.

"What the hell would happen then?" Sam exclaimed to Parker.

Parker, by all appearances, was still incredulous, knowing full well that the White House grounds could never be overrun, and having stated that position a number of times. Nevertheless, the chief executive was promised a plan within five days. After all, with all their reassurances, no one in the Secret Service detail guarding the President could deny that four Presidents had been assassinated in office.

CHAPTER TWO

Three days later, Sam Wainwright was just about to stick a spoon into a grapefruit when Luke Parker entered the small room next to the White House bedroom that Sam used for breakfast. Parker was carrying a black bag. The President smiled to himself. Parker, in hushed tones, made it clear to the President that the backup plan for the White House grounds being overrun by attackers was based on no one else knowing about the plan.

The Secret Service agent took out a fine looking mousy-brown hairpiece and explained that the idea was for the President to change his appearance in the unlikely event the White House was ever overrun. He explained that the Ambassador to Greece had done exactly that during a terrorist attack, creating lots of confusion, and giving the Marine guards enough time to regroup and take care of business.

"Sideburns too," asked Sam.

"Yes sir."

"Ugly horn-rimmed glasses, of course?"

"Yes sir."

"What about identification?"

Parker took out a wallet and handed it to the President.

Inside there were a number of credit cards and a White House pass. Sam studied the White House pass. It included a photograph of how the President would look with the disguise.

"My name is Eddie O'Hara?"

"Yes sir. We even put it up on the computer."

"What do I do?"

"Maintenance man."

Sam smiled.

Parker looked concerned, "It's the best plan we could come up with sir, everything else is already covered."

"No, it's perfect, Luke. Plain common sense and I like that. Let me see if I look like the photo?" Sam, intrigued by the idea of being someone else, put the hairpiece on, then the sideburns.

"How did you know my head size?"

"Sir there isn't much about your body we don't know."

"The clap in Danang?"

"Yes sir, that too."

"How do I look?"

"With a pair of jeans, you look very working class Mr. President."

"You know that's what they call me, Luke, the Blue Collar President. If it weren't for the Marines paying for most of my education, I'd be filling up gas tanks in Eastern Kentucky."

The look on Parker's face took a serious turn.

"What?"

"Would you allow the terrorists to shoot people if they demanded that you come forward, sir?"

"I don't think so."

"That's the problem with the plan, Mr. President."

Sam smiled. "Well, at least with this disguise I still could go to a few discos and meet some ladies who might not be interested in telling the gossip pages how lousy I am in bed. You know, I wouldn't even need you guys along."

"If that's what you have in mind, Mr. President. I wouldn't suggest it. Because if it is we'll find a way to screw it up--remember Mr. President you're not the first bachelor that's ever been in the White House."

Sam put his spoon down.

“But I'm the first orphan.”

Parker smiled.

Sam Wainwright could always get someone to smile, but this was serious. Despite his upward mobility, his first impressions of the world as an orphan stuck in his bones and never stopped reverberating.

Often those impressions were accompanied by instincts that saved him from being a victim of life's uglier moments. Whether it was a tight situation in a schoolyard full of bullies, or leading a patrol through a heavily mined rice paddy, Sam counted on his instincts to guide him through.

Sam went back to attacking his grape fruit. Without looking up he said, “The plan's got a lot of common sense, Luke. I like that.”

“Let's hope we never have to use it, Mr. President. One of the agents will carry your alternate identity around in a black bag.”

Sam looked up. “That's pretty funny, Luke. The Cold-War look all over again. The President followed by an aide holding a black bag.”

Parker smiled, but Sam could see that it was forced. Parker, Sam suspected, believed that a ground assault on the White House was impossible. But like any good agent guarding the chief executive he would go along with the program. That's what the Secret Service did with every President. Go along with any and all bullshit the President could heave in their direction.

Sam Wainwright took longer than usual to finish his meal. Even with a service staff of ninety-six, he felt alone. He dreaded the walk to the Oval Office and its pressures. He was well aware of the feeling inside the Beltway that he had no passion for politics. Oddly, in the beginning he had agreed to run for Congress with little hope of ever getting elected. It often amazed him how far he had come without planning it, beginning with a battlefield commission from the Marines.

As the President, Sam was secure in the knowledge that he'd been vaccinated against most deadly viruses, and a special ambulance stood by to handle any chemical attacks, but his doubts about the White House grounds persisted. He may have been the most protected human on earth, but he wasn't going to let that fact get in the way of his feelings. He didn't feel safe.

CHAPTER THREE

Shelby Mannix was a throwback. The great-great grandson of a Confederate General, Shelby came from a long line of men who had long body trunks that made them look great on a horse. Unfortunately the Mannix men seemed to have also inherited egos that fit perfectly with the idea of looking down on other people from a commanding height.

As chief coordinator for the Speaker of the House, Shelby wielded a considerable degree of power within the Beltway. Particularly since the independent counsel's office had been given the heave ho. Not surprisingly, chief coordinator was not considered the position of a southern gentlemen. "They hire Jews from the North to do that kind of job, don't they, Shelby?" he had heard more than once from his former Citadel classmates.

Shelby, by inclination was a strategist, with a defense lawyer's penchant for investigation. He loved putting the Speaker's opponents in place. Sometimes with good old investigative work, sometimes with Machiavellian planning. In the back of Shelby's mind the concept of being noble was strong, but that's where it belonged-- in the back of his mind. The politics of the new millennium didn't allow for such lofty ideals he had learned in the rough and tumble world of inside-the-Beltway politics.

In his powerful role, Shelby had waited patiently to go after Sam Wainwright. Not only was Wainwright a member of the opposition, but the best target his party had encountered in a long time.

Shelby's boss, Luther Donald, Speaker of the House had done a good job of weakening the new President by preventing his nomination for Vice-President. It wasn't so much that Wainwright wasn't going to eventually get his way, but the longer the nomination was in doubt, the weaker Sam Wainwright appeared to his opponents and the American public.

Some would say Wainwright was already vulnerable. Foreign policy issues were in the sinkhole. The State Department was eating their young. The dramatic increase in terrorism on Wainwright's watch was now at the dinner-discussion level. Americans just didn't feel safe with Sam Wainwright in office no matter how well intentioned he was.

What's more, his leadership in office seemed static on just about every issue. He just didn't seem up to the job.

He had even been accused of bringing the baggage of low self-esteem to the presidency, often appearing inadequate when holding discussions with world leaders. Often allowing them to hog the spotlight. Some psychologists attributed Wainwright's poor performance to his being an orphan.

Wainwright had admitted in interviews that the experience of being awakened from deep sleep, and suddenly placed with foster parents, had left emotional scars.

In his Capital Hill office, five aides sat in front of Shelby, none older than 35. Shelby studied each one for a moment. Not one of them wouldn't turn his mother in for a promotion, he suspected. That was the plus side of this generation, he believed. Each one a product of a corrupt school system that encouraged political correctness to get somewhere instead of brains, but they were deliciously cynical, and he liked that a lot.

"So, what have you barracudas brought to me today?"

"Wainwright is a lousy lover."

"I'll pass on that."

"His support amongst women is dropping dramatically."

"Why is that?" asked Shelby as if he didn't know.

"Well, they all thought he was going to marry the girlfriend, not dump her."

"Who talked to the war buddies?" growled Shelby. Making his impatience known, but realizing that Wainwright had been an elusive subject from the beginning, coming out of nowhere really.

Even heavy digging by the press had turned up little on Shelby, precisely because he was an orphan who had been moved around a lot in his youth.

"A few vets say they remember him, that's about it."

Shelby looked at his five young aides. "A man doesn't work his way up from Vietnam grunt to Vice President of the United States without screwing up."

"Maybe we should try and find out what the terrorists have got on him?" peeped a voice from the back of Shelby's office. It was Ruth Hoffman, the sixth and final member of Shelby's staff, and the most senior. She had just entered the room. Shelby didn't trust Ruth, he had inherited her from an influential Senator who had retired, and he couldn't turn her down without causing a lot of angst. She had an agenda, he was sure of it. Sometimes she was there just to spy on him, he suspected.

Of course her comment was facetious as well. It was plain why terrorists took advantage of Sam Wainwright: he had no balls, concluded Shelby. On the other hand, Wainwright was an ethereal figure. Hard to grasp, and always underestimated. He wasn't going to be an easy target to disgrace in office. But then again Presidents never are--god, what he wouldn't do to get in the mind of a terrorist about to do Wainwright in. How would he do it? Shelby wondered in fascination.

