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# Who painted my State purple?

*A Political Thriller*

Sree Iyer

*Book 1 of the Pax Americana series*

Who painted my State purple?

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Cast of Characters

## West Palm Beach

**Victor Valdez** – Junior Senator from Florida, has the looks and the ability to become America’s first Latino-origin President.

**Mary Hart-Valdez** – Victor’s High School sweetheart and wife of fifteen years, stood by him through thick and thin… and his extra-marital relations.

**James White III** – Boston born and bred, from an old-money family firmly entrenched in Federal Government power and positions. He loves politics, power, and his skill of using bureaucratic “red tape” to get what he wants and benefit friends and family. He was the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights, the highest ranking civilian bureaucratic office.

**Matt Woods** – Born and raised dirt-poor in Arkansas, Matt’s luck and smarts somehow got him into Harvard and on the Harvard rowing team, where he met Jim White. They say that opposites attract - Matt and Jim became lifelong friends and Jim’s connections enabled Matt to become a billionaire hedge fund partner. Matt settled down in West Palm Beach when fate intervened.

**Father Thomas Leahey** – Also born in Arkansas, but raised in Minnesota, a liberal state and decided to become a Catholic priest. Fate was to take him to one of the richest areas of the US, West Palm Beach where he played a major role in shaping Victor Valdez into a powerful politician. Father Leahey had bigger dreams…to use a lifelong friendship with Matt Woods to influence the history of the US.

**Olga Berezin** – Much sought-after Piano teacher, who agrees to teach the Valdez kids after interviewing the parents.

## Washington DC

**Edward Gallagher** - A four-term Senator from Wisconsin, who literally pulled a rabbit out of his hat to win the Democratic nomination… Or so he thought.

**Vice President, Democrat Andrew Jones** – Andrew Jones was part of a winning team, which used the slogan ‘Dare to Dream’ to be in power for two terms. His pitched debates with Edward Gallagher drew parallels to the Lincoln-Douglas debates of the 19th century.

**Bill Adams, Republican challenger** - A billionaire technocrat, who figured out early that people will want to buy everyday items from the comfort of their homes. Self-financed his campaign, keeping the big donors out.

**Mia “Angel Face” Wang** – Bewitchingly beautiful, a student at the Georgetown University, and a spy for China. Successfully honeytraps several US Politicians.

**Jack Edwards** – Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). A ramrod straight, play-by-the-book officer of the Bureau, he was respected by the rank and file but not by the politicians, who liked to paint outside-the-lines but expected everyone else to paint inside-the-lines.

**David Warner** – Director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). As political as they come, he was the opposite of Edwards, with a knack to predict the direction of the wind and accordingly set sail. A patriot at heart, would choose country over the politicians when the choice comes.

**Susan Sanders** – CIA operative, based out of Hong Kong, fluent in Chinese Mandarin and Cantonese and well versed with Chinese customs and culture.

**Phil Bronkowski** – An FBI Special Agent in charge of investigating Mia “Angel Face” Wang and her liaisons. Thought he had her in his grip only for her to give him the slip and escape to China.

## Beijing, PRC

**Premier** – Current General Secretary of the Chinese Communist Party, the head of the country.

**Bai “Bang” Yang** – Number two in the CCP hierarchy. Nicknamed Bang because of how he used to be called by his American classmates when he was a student in the United States.

**Lin Liguo** – Number three in the Chinese Communist Party hierarchy. Has plans to leapfrog One and Two by using damaging information against them.

**Xi “Beijing Bob” Ming** – Field Ops Head of China’s Intelligence Division in the Ministry of State Security (MSS) dealing with the United States of America. Son-in-law of Lin Liguo, married to his only daughter An. Also called “Beijing Bob” because of his prominent Adam’s Apple.

**An Liguo-Ming** – Wife of Xi Ming and daughter of Lin Liguo.

**Team Two** – Led by Dr. Henry Lee, a US-citizen working at Stanford University, who is forced to leave his family and work in China for past sins committed. Spent three years planning desirable outcomes in the US Presidential election by analyzing trends and figuring out ways to tamper the Electronic Voting Machines.

**Team Three** – The Chinese Premier’s handpicked team of people with special skills, will bend/ break laws to ensure that the desired outcome is reached. Ballot stuffing, bribing, blackmailing compromised government officials is all in a day’s work for them.

# 

# 1

Every Red State worries it will turn Blue.

Every Blue State worries it will turn Red.

Welcome to the Purple States of America.

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T

he Chinese Premier, who was also the Head of the Chinese Communist Party was nervously biting his nails, while he kept racking his brain on how to “fix” the next US Presidential election.

He muttered to himself, “I know we have blackmailed both the Democratic and the Republican candidates for President… but the horse we’re now betting on is the Blue one. He can’t fail. I will make him help us out of our economic slump, so that my political position is secure. We must pull out all the stops to make him win!”

Like clockwork, the Chinese Communist Party had accidentally released yet another virus and again the world was going through a crisis that now had become a part of the US Presidential election cycle.

It all started with the birth of another poor boy who dreamed about becoming president…

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Two days to Democratic nomination

Victor Valdez stretched and yawned as he tried to gently extricate himself from the arms of his high school sweetheart, Mary Hart. She was blonde, bright, beautiful… destined to become the perfect political wife. Mary had a ready smile that stretched ear to ear and beautiful white teeth. She could turn on her Southern charm at a moment’s notice, especially while listening to someone’s problems. She had developed the discipline of following up on her promises, which, as a politician’s wife, made her endearing not only to the public but also to the media. Born and raised in the exclusive city of West Palm Beach, of Florida, she had her eye on Victor when she first spotted him on the first day of High School, when he had waited in the registration line to sign up for classes as a freshman.

Victor Valdez was tall for his age, one of the tallest in his class when he turned fourteen. He was well-built with a movie-star like face. And when he smiled, his eyes smiled too – a dream combination for his future political life on the campaign trail.

The phone was ringing, and he knew that he needed to hurry in order to make it to his first meeting of the day. Pouring hot black coffee into a Styrofoam cup, he rushed out of his house just as the car bearing his Chief of Staff pulled up in the driveway. They were meeting a bunch of billionaires after their weekly round of golf at the Mar-a-Lago resort, a place that the former President Donald Trump called his home.

As they were driving and the Chief of Staff rattled the names of the people whose hands he would be pressing, Valdez smiled as he reminisced his days as a kid eating breakfast that consisted mostly of products made by the cereal manufacturer Post, whose heiress and socialite Marjorie Merriweather Post was the first owner of Mar-a-Lago.

He grimaced inwardly as he wondered what these buccaneers of Wall Street would want from him in return for what he hoped would be a quarter-million-dollar fund raiser. He knew full well that he would only be able to satisfy a fraction of the demands they would impose on him – they knew it too but reached for the sky anyway and the trick was to give just enough for them to not grumble till the next elections. And the cycle started all over again.

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Victor and Mary had met at the Suncoast Community High School in Florida. Because of the student population, and more importantly the affluence of the parents, who thought nothing of donating thousands to the school, it was nationally ranked for academic excellence.

Despite being rich beyond belief, Mary’s parents believed in the Public School system and wanted their only daughter to experience the plurality of America. Mary was studious, brilliant and chose debate in High School and that is where she ran into Victor again.

Even though he was tall and well-built, Victor did not make time for team sports. Beyond the odd pick-up basketball game or a touch football game with his friends, he was more of a bookworm than a jock. He knew that as a poor boy, he could never get ahead without getting into a good college. Victor also knew even in middle school that he was good looking, as he would draw admiring glances from girls.

To understand a bit more about Victor’s childhood and his upbringing, one needs to go back to the story of how his non-American pregnant mother, Arianna, made a dangerous journey and ended up giving birth in the United States…

# 2

“I have hatched a plan to manipulate the vote counts so as to make the result appear realistic. The total number of votes cast will not change – what will change is how the vote gets counted. The machines shipped to these nine counties have been preset with a co-efficient by which to move votes of one candidate to another are set. These vary from 0.13 to 0.06.”

“I don’t understand. What does that mean?”

“Say we have 100 votes cast for A and 100 for B. If the co-efficient is set to 0.06, then the number of votes cast for A will show 106 and B, 94.”

“How on earth is that possible?”

“Because the Electronic Voting Machines store the vote as a floating-point variable – meaning 1 vote is stored in the memory as 1.00. In these Electronic Voting Machines, 1 vote to A is stored as 1.06. Similarly, 1 vote to B is stored as 0.94.”

“But won’t that show up as a fraction in the final tally?”

“No, it won’t. Because the final results are rounded off and the two fractional digits will be omitted from being displayed.”

\*\*\*

Four decades ago, …

A

rianna Valdez was pregnant and found walking mile after mile, with no end in sight no bother at all. She was a run-away from the streets of Caracas, Venezuela, after being witness to a gruesome crime… the gunning down of her husband Juan Valdez, whose only mistake was to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Sitting with his back to the street, a hailstorm of bullets rained on the unsuspecting couple when some started firing at a local politician and his security detail fired back. Juan heroically took the brunt of the bullet storm, giving his life for hers and their unborn child.

As he lay dying in her arms, all Juan could whisper was, “This country is falling apart… Go to the US… Get a better future for our son.”

It was in one of those violent confrontations between the people and the government security authorities that Valdez Sr. became a victim by mistake. By then he too had realized that there was no future left for the likes of him and his family in Venezuela. Which explains his last words to his wife.

With every step Arianna Valdez took, she became more determined and more resolved. The United States was far away, and the caravan in which she had joined was packed with people like her, fleeing their homes and old life.

Arianna Valdez was twenty-two and good looking. She took care to be with the women, who knew what she was going through when she told them she was pregnant. The convoy of four hundred or so, had people from various countries, all carrying dreams in their eyes, convinced, to suppress their desperation, that a better future lay ahead for them. If only they could get there in one piece…

Every Thursday, a small group of international aid workers would come to their caravan in the dark of night, usually between 2 AM and 3 AM, and would dispense medicine, food, and some pocket money for them to last for the week. Invariably, the money ran out before their next visit and it was with great enthusiasm that the caravan welcomed them. While the crew changed, a priest, who the travelers figured was their *true friend*, was always there. With a kind word here, a hug there, a handshake and always a bright smile. They had gotten so used to this practice that it did not occur to any of them to ask as to why the priest and his group was being so generous. Thinking that they can save their money for the coyotes who would smuggle them into America, even those with some means accepted the gifts that Father Thomas Leahey and his group were bringing.

It was a Tuesday, around 3 AM, when someone stirred Arianna Valdez awake. It was the priest. In US accented Spanish, he told her that the group was being arrested and that he had gotten advance information. He asked her to grab her belongings and follow him. Arianna was still not fully awake and was unable to comprehend the priest. But she understood that there was a problem. On the spur of the moment, she decided to follow him, keeping the heavier bag with her, and giving him the lighter one. Father Tom, an insightful man, smiled and insisted on taking the heavier load.

The camp was quiet as they slipped into the darkness, and into a rickety Volkswagen van. He slid the door, allowing her to get into the back. He whispered to her to cover herself among the blankets so she would not be visible. He was planning to cross the border, from Guatemala into Mexico. The United States Government had given money to crack down on the caravan, in an effort to deter any future assays of this nature.

There was a brief stop at the border, as Father Leahey hailed the customs agents and gave them a box of Black Label Whisky which he had bought in the States. Three bottles exchanged, the gate was opened with not a glance to see who or what was in the van. So far, so good.

They were cautious, driving only at night through Mexico and stopping at motels during the day, ignoring the looks of the front desk person, who looked askance at a priest accompanied by a pregnant woman. Most Mexicans were Catholic and were not comfortable seeing a priest with a significantly younger woman. It violated their social mores at various levels.

The Catholic Church had a mixed history with the government of Mexico. But in the end, the Church did not give up and immersed itself in social activities. It also promoted the formation of a political party, the National Action Party. A new framework came in place, lifting some of the restrictions.

However, the prospects of some ‘extra’ money kept the people, looking curiously at the odd couple — a young pregnant woman and a priest — quiet. In a matter of days, the Volkswagen arrived at the border of the US, near Laredo.

Father Tom Leahey was the head of a parish in West Palm Beach that was part of the Archdiocese of Miami. Many affluent retirees from New York had settled into West Palm Beach city, a suburb of Miami. It was time to take the next steps, steps that Arianna was unaware of.

# 3

F

ather Tom Leahey had worked as a volunteer in Mexico, in the city of Nuevo Laredo, the Mexican side of Laredo, Texas, before he became a priest. He still remembered his host family, who took him in and treated him as one of their own for the three months that he had spent volunteering. Of them, he thought the most about Maria Lupe, the young mother, who needed the money she received from hosting an exchange student.

He had been one among the hundreds of students who spent time in a foreign country in exchange for someone from that country to come to the US and spend a semester. An education in the United States promised to open a new window of opportunities for these students who, in their own countries, might not have got those options. Once educated, many of the students either return to their native countries and explore better opportunities or relocate to other places where career offers are more attractive.

Father Leahey was born in Arkansas, but mostly grew up in Minnesota. He went to a high school which had students from as many as 20 different countries under the program. Foreign students live with host families who treat them like family. Besides, there are coordinators who are appointed to take care of issues that may arise with the foreign students.

Leahey was a gangly teenager when he arrived in Nuevo Laredo, Mexico. He had since not been in touch with Maria Lupe, the matriarch of the Santos family who had made him feel so much at home. He was not even sure if she was still alive and if they still lived in the same house. In the decades since that experience, he had embraced priesthood and finding both satisfaction and a sense of purpose in his work. He was now Father Leahey.

And it was in this new image that he was visiting the neighborhood where he had spent his youth. Father Leahey had a hunch just from the way the people looked up to the Santos family that not only would the family be there, but it might also have expanded its footprint.

When he arrived, he found the place completely changed; the roads were smooth and cleanly paved, and the town looked prosperous. Many American companies were setting up manufacturing plants in Laredo and it was a rising tide that was lifting all the boats. Many Mexicans drove their cars every day across the border to the United States, worked during the day and returned in the evening. It was evident that Mexico’s relationship with the US had played a major role in the transformation of the former’s economy.

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The house in which Father Tom had stayed, had changed dramatically. What used to be a ranch style house had now transformed into a 4-floor building with an underground parking lot.

It was with some trepidation that Father Leahey knocked on the door. The chimes reverberated inside the house and before long a teenage girl, no more than 17, opened the door.

“Greetings. Can I speak with Senora Santos?” Father Tom asked tentatively, in Spanish.

The girl took one look at him and figured out that he wanted to meet Senora Maria Lupe Santos, her grandmother. She replied to him in fluent English, “Let me see if grandma is around.”

Age had not slowed Maria Lupe Santos down. She still looked the same dynamic, feisty person that he had met years ago. Maria Lupe was not sure at first that she recognized Tom Leahey, but then memories came back fast. The shock for her was to see that he had become a priest. She involuntary made the sign of the cross on herself and invited him in. Arianna was still sitting in the van although he left all the windows down to get some breeze flowing.

In halting Spanish, Father Leahey explained what he needed from Maria Lupe. “She is pregnant and unfortunately lost her husband in a riot in Venezuela. I intend to get her a visa so she can be in the United States till she can apply for asylum. I need a few days to get into the ‘States and work my contacts and it would be a huge favor if you could look after her.” Maria Lupe Santos understood and kept nodding her head yes. Once he finished, she thought for a moment, made up her mind and stood up. “Let us welcome Arianna,” she said.

Arianna had dozed off in the van when Father Tom gently shook her awake. She suddenly became aware of where she was and realized with relief that she was face-to-face with a kind Mexican grandmother.

Maria Lupe introduced her large, extended family and Father Tom was having a hard time at first keeping track of all the names in the family. But being a member of the clergy, he was able to learn quickly and would always address the person he ran into by name – whether right or wrong. It became a game for the Santos family to see how many he would get right, and they were amazed that within a couple of days, he was recognizing each member.

Arianna stayed with Maria Lupe for three weeks before Father Leahey returned. In that period, she could not have been more comfortable even at home. The entire Santos family led by Maria Lupe tended to her like one of their own. She was taken to a local doctor for checkup, given the best diet for a pregnant woman, and forbidden from doing heavy tasks at home.

She yearned to contribute in some way to the household chores, but Maria Lupe gently but firmly told her to take it easy. “I want to see that your child is healthy,” she said with a smile. Arianna thought of the family she had left behind and thanked God for the love and care she was receiving from complete strangers.

# 4

The Chinese Premier was overjoyed when he found out that it was possible to change the results of a US election if he could control the Electronic Voting Machines. He quietly ordered that fake “dummy” corporations be set up throughout the world, especially throughout the US and start to bid against one another to buy the most popular voting machine in existence.

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Late fifties…

J

ames White III was born and bred in Boston, in a family rich with old money. One of the United States’ most populous cities, Boston was a hub of scientific and medical innovations as well as business entrepreneurship. It was rated as among the world’s 30 most economically powerful cities.

White came from a lineage of officers who had reached top positions in the administration and had considerable influence, besides money. Generations of the White family had rolled in wealth, earned as the city’s economy grew, in which the bureaucracy played a pivotal role. The perks of being part of this transformation were attractive indeed.

Having grown up in this environment, White loved politics, and the power of red tape. He was the Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy and Human Rights, among the highest ranks one could rise in the bureaucracy. But his appetite remained large as ever; he wanted to move higher, and faster.

Matt Woods, on the other hand, was born poor in Arkansas to a family of small tenant-farmers struggling to make a living. That was many years ago, but even today the farming sector in Arkansas is not as strong as it is elsewhere in the US. The average cattle herd size was thirty-five head, and 80% of the approximately 24,000 cattle farms in the state had fewer than fifty head of livestock. Over one half of the state's farms raise cattle.

Woods proved to be a brilliant student, which was a relief to his family. With the help of beneficiaries and scholarships, he gained admission to the prestigious Harvard University where he rubbed shoulders with the wards of influential and wealthy families. White was one of them. It is said that opposites attract, and a lifelong friendship ensued between the two.

He had an overriding motive: to come out of the state of poverty he had experienced in his life and make money to last a lifetime and more. He had no romantic illusions about poverty or about middle-class values, which he believed were good talking points but dispensable according to the situation at hand. Because of his Harvard friends and contacts, he got in to Wall Street and hedge funds, and in time, he became a billionaire. He had a way with Finance, the golden touch which others envied. But there was no magic in what he did; it was a result of hard and focused research. Matt Woods settled down in West Palm Beach, when fate intervened.

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Woods and White were members of the rowing team in Harvard. The institution had given big names in that sport to the US and the world’s sporting community too. Some of the players had even reached Olympic levels, representing their country. Not just that, the rowers had been at the forefront in the past when it came to equal rights for Black sportsmen. The fact that the US rowing national team consisted of all-white men, strengthened the Harvard rowers’ resolve further to end the discrimination. Both White and Woods were enthusiastic supporters of the end-discrimination movement, which endeared them to the liberals in the campus.

They teamed up well in the sport, having excellent coordination. In time to come they extinguished competition from other institutions, including Yale. They were toasted by Harvard and developed strong bonds with each other. With undergraduate degrees acquired, White went to work for - who else - the government. Woods made his way to Wall Street. After dabbling in various financial instruments with success, he decided to specialize in hedge funds, which offered a host of opportunities for quick money. Besides, the market was baying for faster wealth creation and there were enough people out there willing to invest for greater and faster returns, even if the risks were many.

# 5

W

oods did not have much trouble in securing a high-paying job at Wall Street. One of the leading financial services firms snapped him up as he completed college, and he spent the next three years working for it, quickly grasping the intricate and often opaque world of international finance. He learnt the tricks of servicing high-value clients, ensuring that they got the best returns on their investments. At times, he would also be part of teams that worked on mergers and acquisitions.

But just after two years in service he had begun to seriously consider branching out on his own. He started to make elaborate preparations for the planned departure in 12 months. He had meticulously maintained a list of the lucrative clients he had worked with, understood the ins and outs of the financial services industry, and in the process devised methods that were not exactly ethical but legal and certainly beneficial to the clients. In doing so he had managed to earn handsome commissions for himself.

When he quit, a new term had come into existence in the market: hedge funds. Few people understood it. Even fewer mastered it. Woods lost no time in grappling with the novelty. In simple terms, a hedge fund was capital that was invested on the premise of an anticipated development which would yield profits. It also referred to financial instruments that covered against possible risks. Taken together hedge funds promised a win-win situation for a sharp player.

Woods found the idea fascinating. You would bet against firm X because you believe that it is underperforming and could be in trouble. Your calculation proves right, and stocks of X begin to fall. You make a killing while the stocks go down by short selling.

The concept is simple but hidden in it is the potential to cause havoc in the market and make money for the short seller. An investor would borrow a stock, sell it, and then buy back the sold stock to return it to the lender. Short sellers bet that the stock they sell would drop in price.

Returning to hedging, even if X is going down it may be able to attract new customers and rebound. You would lose money in the process. To make up for that loss, you buy beforehand some stocks of the competitor as well, which is likely to benefit by X’s plunge in stock prices. In short, you have hedged your bet well before these developments played out, making money either way — whether stocks fell or rose.

Hedge funds can also borrow money to undertake their enterprise. The stronger the hunch (bet), the more money you would be tempted to borrow to make a tidy profit at the end.

When Matt Woods branched out on his own, he called his firm, Global Hedge Funds (GHF). He hired young experts who were driven to make profits - they could become millionaires by simply raking in the commissions on the deals they did. In less than four years, Woods, who was not yet 35 years of age, had enough millionaires on his payroll to begin attracting national and global attention; in the process he was closing in on his first billion.

It would be a few years later when Woods, whose imprint was now global, boasting of the wealthiest clients, nearly brought a leading bank of one of the developed countries to its knees, through his hedge fund tactics. It would recover in the years that followed but not before Woods had pocketed at least a billion from the venture. In one stroke, he had become both a villain and a hero for many. He had led a group of traders to break the entire foreign currency system of that country and profited at the expense of millions of ordinary taxpayers. How this came about is a story within itself.

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In the post-World War II period, European countries worked to integrate their economies tightly with one another. The idea was that this would not just create a stable economy in the region but also cushion it from turbulences that may arise amongst the member nations. The European Exchange Rate Mechanism (ERM) was thus created, which meant that member countries agreed to fix the exchange rates of their respective currencies. The arrangement worked well for some years.

The country Woods targeted too had adopted the ERM. But the government soon realized that its currency was overvalued in comparison to the currency of the country which had been unanimously accepted by the members as a benchmark because it was the strongest currency among all. It was importing more than it exported. There was pressure on the government to take corrective measures. When a country imports more that it exports, then it is expected that the said country would weaken its exchange rate. But because of it being tied to the ERM, it could not. Something had to give.

Woods was carefully studying the developments and he concluded that the beleaguered currency could be devalued soon. “Go for the jugular,” was his directive to his team.

GHF decided to ‘short’ the currency; that is, hedge on the prospect of that currency’s value going down. He made his moves on the premise that the currency would be devalued in the coming months. Large sums of money in that currency were borrowed to buy the currency that was on the upswing. But Woods had to hedge on the possibility of the devaluing currency bouncing back. But he did not have to sweat on that possibility. The currency was already overpriced and kept afloat by the government; there was no chance of it ever appreciating.

So, either the currency would stay roughly at the same value (in which case he would not lose money, even if he did not make any) or it would be devalued, and the firm would roll in wealth.

Woods was in a conference with his senior finance people led by the Chief Financial Officer (CFO). They were all upbeat, as things were going as they had expected. But the CFO had some doubts.

He asked, “What if the government of that country intervenes to save the currency’s downfall, even if artificially?”

Woods responded with a counter question, “What can the government do?”

“Well, it could increase the rate of interest, thus making the currency more attractive.”

Woods smiled and said, “That nation’s economy is in shambles. It is teetering towards a recession. The government is scrambling to garner funds for its essential programs. How can it afford to increase interest rates?”

The CFO persisted, “But what if the government, in desperation, took the gamble?”

“Assuming that it does, do you think it will be the first step?” Woods asked.

“No, it would resort to it only as a last measure.”

“Exactly,” Woods exclaimed. “If the government takes the decision, it would be as a desperate last measure. But by then it would be too late, and we would have made our money.”

He was proved right. The government did intervene by announcing a hike in interest rates to entice people into buying the troubled currency, after it realized that it just could not find enough people to buy the currency otherwise. But the damage had been done. In fact, even the hike in interest rate by a total of five percentage points did nothing to halt the plummeting of the currency.

Woods and his fund increased their short position against the troubled currency from roughly two billion dollars to about 10 billion dollars.

Through the night, while Europe slept, Woods borrowed and sold the currency from anyone he could. Other hedge funds got the hint and began selling and buying as well. The following morning, when the dust settled, the currency was doomed, and Woods had made a billion dollars just out of that single transaction.

If he had not arrived before, he certainly had now.

# 6

“The problem that we Americans have is that we can’t even count properly,” said the Stanford Professor in one of his meetings with the Chinese Premier. “The job of elections is left to states and counties in the states, and each is at liberty to pick whichever method they want to tabulate the elections. In fact, some of the Electronic Voting Machines treat the votes as floating-point numbers, that is store one vote as 1.00 in the computer’s memory. Don’t ask why – it is a feature!”

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Early Eighties…

F

ather Tom Leahey bid Arianna and the Santos family goodbye, having ensured that Arianna was already feeling at home. The tragedy-hit woman was grateful to the priest for his rescue of her. Father Tom crossed into the ‘States and drove straight for the small Laredo International airport.

The airport, which is in Webb Country, Texas, had a history. It was used by the United States Army Air Forces during World War II, then known as the Laredo Army Airfield, and by the United States Air Force as Laredo Air Force Base during the Cold War as a pilot training base. As part of a nationwide defense cutback following the Vietnam war, its military role ended in December 1973.

At the entrance to the airport is the statue, Among Friends There Are No Borders, designed by Armando Hinojosa of Laredo, which depicts a South Texas vaquero and a Mexican charro sharing a campfire.

Leaving the van in the long-term parking area just a mile away from the airport saved precious money for him, especially since he did not know how long it would be before he would return.

The flight to West Palm Beach had one stop, in Dallas-Fort Worth. It allowed him to stretch his legs and also call Matt Woods from the DFW airport to tell him about the happenings in the caravan. It had been a while since they had talked.

“Hi Hillbilly! How’s things?” Father Leahey and Woods shared this banter always, being from Arkansas. They had met at the local Church at Palm Beach to which Leahey was attached and had conversed casually. It was during the small talk that they learned of their shared Arkansas connection. Thereafter, they talked more, and more. Not too long after, they were sounding like long lost friends. Since that time, the two had maintained regular contact.

And they did not know that a youngster, just like them, would in future, rise all the way to the top of the political ladder to become the President of the US of A.

“All good, all good,” Woods said genially. He wanted an update from the priest on what had happened at the Guatemala-Mexico border and how the caravan had been disbanded by Mexico’s para-military forces. Woods was the patron donor who was funding the members of the caravan on a weekly basis, using Leahey. He had seen old money treat him and his ilk with contempt through his youth and he promised himself that when he got a chance, he would show them who he was.

Though success pursued him, this thought of his, that the old money did not deserve it, was always on his mind. But he could not do anything about it, until he chanced upon the book Envisioning Real Utopias by Erik Olin Wright. As he read it, he was fascinated by how the author analyzed what is wrong with Capitalism and the practical alternatives. The more he read about the abject poverty in Latin America, the more he was convinced that Socialism and Open Borders was the only answer. Funding this caravan was his first laboratory experiment and Father Leahey his first chemist.

When news of a growing caravan broke on TV, he knew that the US Government would crack down, sooner or later. He thought he had it covered, using his good buddy, James White III. But clearly there was a miscommunication and the news of the caravan being broken up came as a shock to Woods and his well laid plans.

After talking about this and that, Woods finally veered to the point. “So, what happened, Father?”

“I need to catch my flight. Can we meet tomorrow? 11 AM?”

“Of course! Please come by Father. Looking forward…”

The lunch meeting lasted two hours, and the two reminisced about growing up in Arkansas. But that conversation didn’t last long, since time was precious for both and they had to come to the point sooner than later. Father Tom explained what had happened at the border and how the caravan was broken up.

For the past several months, thousands of migrants had reached the US-Mexico border after travelling more than 2,500 miles from Central or Latin America in what came to be called migrant caravans. Most were fleeing persecution, poverty, and unrest in their home countries, and trying to sneak into the US despite stern warning from US authorities that they would face arrest, and even deportation, if they were caught.

The situation had also resulted in bringing added focus on drug trafficking. US authorities suspected that the caravans were being organized by drug smugglers and human traffickers who had no regard for the lives of thousands of men, women, and children they were bringing illegally. The US administration had asked its authorities to crack down on such caravans. One of the Central American countries, Guatemala, was at the receiving end, and so were others like Venezuela etc. It was part of this action that the unfortunate Arianna had almost become a victim — almost because Leahey rescued her in the nick of time.

After hearing the story, Woods remained silent for a moment. He knew what was coming next. Father Leahey would ask his help in getting Arianna in.

Father Thomas left no stone unturned in emphasizing and re-emphasizing Arianna’s tragic plight, impressing upon Woods the need to get her in into the ‘States. Convinced, Woods called up White and explained the situation. “It’s for a friend and fellow Arkansan. I need your help,” he said.

White said that it would make his job easier if there was a sponsor for her so she could find refuge in the States. Coincidentally, Leahey’s congregation had a power couple who had just moved to West Palm Beach from New York. The Browns - Mike and Lynda - did not have time for Church as they were pursuing their respective careers. But after they moved to West Palm Beach, they re-discovered religion, and humanity. They heard out the priest and agreed to sponsor Arianna.

It suited their purpose, of course. The couple needed someone to take care of their two children, aged five and seven, respectively. Since they already had a nanny who was competent and trusted, Arianna would join as her assistant. It would give her the chance to settle down in her new environment.

# 7

W

ith the way shown, the paperwork came through in record time. Within three weeks, Father Leahey was back in Nuevo Laredo, ready to get Arianna back to the ‘States. After visiting the US Consulate in Nuevo Laredo and getting all the relevant documents stamped, the road was clear to cross over. They entered Laredo.

It was a 20-hour drive from Laredo to West Palm Beach. Arianna was amazed at the growth, cleanliness, and modernity that the US represented. It was such a stark contrast to where she came from. She needed to work on learning the English language, but was pleasantly surprised that many spoke Spanish, even though the accent was different. She thanked her stars that Father Leahey had taken a fatherly interest in her and given her a break in life.

Arianna quickly got into the routine that prevailed at the Browns’ residence. She worked alongside the nanny and assisted her ably. Everyone was pleased. Arianna was now four months pregnant.

With her warm and easy-going nature, she soon won over the love and affection of the children. They doted on her and she became an inseparable part of their little lives. They shared every small bit with her — their games, their kid talk… every time they quarreled with each other, they would go to her for a resolution.

The Browns were happy at the turn of events. They had taken a great liking for Arianna and it was difficult to believe that only a few months ago she had been a stranger to them and the children.

Interacting with the family and the children, Arianna had learnt the English language well, and had begun to speak it fluently, though with an accent. The kids took special delight in coaching her and squealed with delight when she blundered occasionally. At times, she would deliberately make a mistake and wait for the children to correct her. As Arianna neared the scheduled date for childbirth, she shifted to the parish, where she stayed with Father Leahey.

As Arianna mingled with the parishioners, she had a kind word for everyone. In fact, her popularity led to a surge in the attendance figures at Sunday Mass.

But then misfortune struck when she went into labor. Complications set in. She was diagnosed with acute myocardial infarction (AMI), a rare disease. It led to respiratory and cardiac problems. She complained of severe abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting and breathlessness. A specialist, who had been summoned from a nearby hospital, worked with the local doctor to revive her but failed.

Arianna breathed her last, but the child was delivered healthy. This was something of a miracle because Arianna’s condition threatened the fetus.

Father Leahey found himself with Arianna’s child. As she was being wheeled into the ICU, she flashed the Victory sign as if to communicate that she would be right back. Whether it was to revive her benefactor’s spirits, could only be speculated. But Father Leahey took it as a different kind of hint. The choice for a name for the new-born, for him, was a no-brainer. Victor Valdez was born as 1981 entered the second month, on the 4th day.

# 8

When he came to know that “It is possible to get dead people to vote in the United States,” the Premier could not believe it. “A country so advanced in some areas is so backward in not ‘cleaning up’ old voting rolls? And not requiring photo identification to show up and vote?”

Even as he read the secret report, his mind was racing ahead. Could the “fake” voters be paid enough money to keep their mouths shut, after the fake vote had taken place? Is it just a matter to getting them a few freebies and instant gratification items and they will do his bidding?

The Chinese Premier rubbed his hands in glee… this might be easier than he originally thought.

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Democratic convention…

F

lorida’s junior senator Victor Valdez flicked an imaginary piece of flint from his exquisitely tailored suit and checked himself in the mirror. Every hair was in its place, and the length just right – not too long, not too short. Fingers manicured, teeth blindingly white and eyes that smiled. He could see his reflection on his patent leather shoes with tassels as Mary busied herself, trying to get everything right before stepping out to meet the press.

Democratic Presidential nominee Edward Gallagher switched on his smile as he announced his Vice-Presidential pick. Gallagher, a four-term senator from Wisconsin had mastered the knack of winning a bruising primary to be the last man left standing. Unseating the ex-Vice President, Democrat Andrew Jones was the toughest one of all.

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Eight months before the election…

The Democratic Presidential finalists were Edward Gallagher and Vice President Andrew Jones. With just two in the race, the rhetoric became a lot sharper. Before that, all they had to do was not make any mistakes, stay above the noise and finish among the top four. But when it came to one-on-one battles, each knew that he was just two steps away from being the most powerful man in the world and they left no stone unturned in trying to find out dirt on the other person.

By no means was this happening for the first time in a Presidential race. Across decades, same-party presidential hopefuls who made it to the last two had become ruthless fighters, and nothing, not even the fact that they belonged to the same party, prevented them from taking uncharitable swipes at each other. Interestingly, more often than not, once the final candidate was decided at his (or her) party convention, many of those who had gone hammer and tongs at the person quickly endorsed the candidate. At one level, this was considered the right thing to do. At another, it made practical sense since the others would have to work with the individual if he were to become President.

Gallagher was trailing across America by about five percentage points. Vice-President Jones ran on his record, of being the wingman of an extremely popular Democrat President, who dared to dream (Dare to Dream was his slogan). While not all dreams turned out to be good, over the two terms that they were at the helm, America had progressed. This goodwill dividend was giving Jones a five-point cushion and Gallagher needed to pull a rabbit out of the hat to pip Jones at the post of the Democratic Primary.

The choice of the Vice-Presidential candidate is not done till one wins the party nomination – one thing at a time, get nominated first and then work on a running mate. The Republican opponent was a formidable adversary, a billionaire technocrat who saw the potential of buying goods from home at the click of a button and had grown his company relentlessly, always one step ahead of the competition, with a knack of knowing what to do next. His name was Bill Adams.

Gallagher studied the burgeoning Latino population of America, which had broken through the 20% mark. What was limited to the border states of California, Arizona and Texas had now acquired a broader base as Latino-Americans gravitated to higher paying, prosperous jobs and to the bigger cities. And the US had never had a Latino-American Vice-President.

Gallagher was quick to recognize Valdez’s political worth in this backdrop. Besides, Valdez was just the ideal Vice-presidential mate. He had the looks of a film star and was a perfect family man, with a photogenic wife and four children — two sons and two daughters. He spoke well, was the younger Senator (from Florida) and adored by the Latino population across the country, who saw in him their hopes and aspirations if they worked hard and grabbed the opportunities that came their way.

Gallagher’s and Valdez’s team worked in tandem to draw up a plan to scorch the country with their rallies. No state, big or small, was left out. From Florida to Pennsylvania, from Texas to North Carolina, nothing was ignored. At every rally, Gallagher spoke of a “United” States of America, where the Latinos and the Whites and the Blacks were one in their desire to keep aloft the American flag.

Gallagher would say, “You came from elsewhere, made America your home, and have made this great nation proud by your contributions. We love you; we admire you!” The crowd roared in approval. The Presidential candidate would then point to his presumptive running mate and say, “Senator Valdez is a living example of the resilience and commitment to American values that you all have. If I am chosen as your candidate, I will have him as my Vice-Presidential candidate, that is if he would accept.” Loud cheers would break out.

Gallagher was, meanwhile, careful to also reach out to the White population. “You are wonderful people,” he said at a rally with a dominantly White population. “You have demonstrated the great American spirit by embracing all other Americans, regardless of their race and origin, in crafting this best of all nations. You have worked hand in hand. We love you!”

As the date for a series of one-on-one debates between Gallagher and Jones neared, the percentage deficit was close to being wiped out. Gallagher, spurred by the Valdez leverage, had speedily closed in on his rival. Suddenly, what had seemed difficult, if not impossible, seemed within reach. *The New York Times* reported that Gallagher, “boosted by Valdez and through a series of statements of inclusivity”, had closed the gap between his rival enough to have a good chance at the White House. *The Washington Post* remarked that Gallagher’s strategy was aimed at “bridging the chasm that had been created over the past few months among fellow Americans by leaders who appealed more to the majority community.”

Jones and his team watched the developments in amazement and with concern. It was too late to make course corrections; in any case they could hardly contest the pitch of inclusivity that Gallagher had adopted. They could only hope that the voters were not swayed by the rhetoric and that they would still remain impressed by Jones’ track record.

# 9

T

his was, however, a debate that was part of the process to decide on the Democratic Party nominee. Having seen Gallagher reveal his presumptive Vice-Presidential pick, Jones was feeling the pressure of having to choose his running mate. It was difficult and easy – difficult because he had not yet started the process but made easy because the other side had shown its hand.

Jones, who exuded confidence despite the content turning into a close one, began on a predictable note. He dwelt on his humble beginnings, his man-next-door image, his contributions to the American public space as Vice President, his clean record. And, of course, he talked about American values and his vision of governance which would take the US to the next level of excellence. “I offer change with continuity,” he concluded.

Gallagher had realized early on that he had to not only say something different but also make it believable. He too harped on his modest beginnings, the struggle in his life and how he overcame them, his journey, and contributions as a Senator. Then he switched track and said, “I am appalled at the social divisions that have been created by some wrong policies of the current administration. As Americans, we ought to be one. I propose to undo the artificial divide. There cannot be discrimination between one American and the other. If we weaken from within, we weaken from without. There are countries out there who wish exactly that — that we get weak and are unable to fulfil our role as a global leader. I will not allow that to happen.”

There was a good deal of sparring between the two contestants, but the debate was largely civil in nature and no damaging personal remarks were exchanged.

Jones tried to push his rival into a corner by suggesting that the latter had once endorsed a Republican President in the past on a clutch of economic policies. Gallagher set the record straight, “I had complimented the then President for having got to his side a significant number of Democrats on the issue. But even so I had objected to the policies. While I was working the streets expressing my views, you had been working at the behest of the corporates who would benefit the most out of those policies.”

Jones hit back, using another issue. He said that while he had been fighting retrogressive ideas on human rights, and women’s rights in particular, Gallagher had been silent. “You were seen to be on the wrong side,” he remarked, adding, “Every time you are confronted with what you had said, you turn around and say that that was not what you meant. It is so difficult to know what you mean. That’s not good for the nation.”

Much of that sparring came about how each had been seen to be endorsing the Republicans in the past. The debate ended in a draw, with both sides scoring well, and the crowd cheering them equally. The questions had been asked by a panel of three TV anchors from CNN and Telemundo TV.

The Democratic convention to choose the Presidential candidate was just days away, but it could all turn out be a mere formality. The buzz was all about the Gallagher-Valdez duo, owing to the uncanny knack of Valdez complementing each Gallagher TV appearance and anecdote with a personal one of his own – his widowed mother’s miraculous escape from Venezuela, thanks to the kindness of a priest; to his adopted parents (the Browns, who let him keep his last name). While Jones had put up a good show, it seemed evident that the Valdez factor would swing the pendulum in Gallagher’s favor. Unless something went seriously wrong in the interim.

# 10

Premier’s residence, Beijing

T

he Chinese Premier was deep in thought, as he tried to remember how he had funded an Electronic Voting Machine company based in Canada ten years ago, when the firm was on the verge of bankruptcy. As the world’s democracies moved towards Electronic Voting Machines, this company was considered as the leader since its machine could be used not only to count votes but for other purposes too, such as helping companies deal with shareholders who had multiple weights associated with their stocks.

For instance, one vote of a preferred shareholder had a weightage of 1.25; a common shareholder’s was 0.90. A preferred shareholder might be bringing in investment in the form of investment money and networking contacts whereas the other may be putting in sweat equity. So, when the time came to take a vote, the Digitalis System could be re-programmed to help companies do this. If a School District were looking to push a proposal and needed to tabulate what the constituents wanted, Digitalis could do the job.

Storing a vote which is essentially a natural number such as 1, 2, 3… as 1.00, 2.00, 3.00 in Digitalis’s memory, took more resources but gave the system greater flexibility and, hence, wider market as the same hardware with slight software modifications gave the company several verticals.

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A few years ago…

Jones had cut off all ties with Mia “Angel Face” Wang after the Federal Bureau of Investigation had warned him about her. He was the Vice President then and Angel Face had disappeared without a trace after the FBI had paid him a visit – in fact, as soon as he came to know, he had someone check the love-nest that he was using for his secret meetings with Ms. Wang. She was vivacious, in her late twenties, and had joined the Undergrad program at Georgetown University located in downtown Washington DC, a stone’s throw from Lincoln Memorial and Washington Memorial.

Wang was introduced to the then VP by Denise Chang, an attractive CEO of a large shipping group out of New York, the Great Oriental Shipping Co (GOSCO), as a recent student at the University where Denise Chang headed the Global China Economic Initiatives Chair. Chang was married to Mark Bernstein, a Wall Street wizard who had suddenly passed away, leaving his considerable fortune to the already rich Chang. GOSCO was a mature business and gave her plenty of time to schmooze with the high and mighty of New York and the Beltway. Jones always had a glad eye, and it was not by accident that Angel Face kept bumping into him at social events and fundraiser rallies.

As a senior Democrat, Jones was perennially into fundraising mode for his party – in fact on many afternoons, he could be found working the phones, talking to presumptive donors from The Den, a basement office that all Democrats were expected to drop in, to raise funds for the party.

Campaign funding is done at the federal, state, and local levels. The first of these is enforced by the Federal Election Commission, which is an independent federal agency. While most of the campaign spending is done through private donations, public financing is an option for qualifying candidates at both the primaries and the general elections.

Funding for non-federal offices is governed by state and local law. Some states impose limits on such spending, while others allow unions and other outfits to contribute money to campaign funding.

Huge sums are exhausted in campaign funding. In recent elections, a qualifying candidate had spent as much $700 million. The federal spending taken as a total could exceed billions of dollars. The money comes primarily from four sources: small individual contributors, large individual contributors, political action groups, and through self-financing by candidates.

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By the third “accidental” meeting, Jones was ready to take the relationship to the next level. His wife had left for home for the weekend, and he had shown up alone for the party. Guess what? Wang was there too. In a few minutes Jones decided that he wanted to take Wang to his love-nest, a discreet apartment tucked away in Alexandria, Virginia. But since he was the second-most powerful man on Earth, the security detail had to tag along too; Jones could not keep his hands off Wang as they were driving in the US Government issued, proof-from-every-possible-method-of-attack suburban van to his pad.

What ensued next was a passionate session of aggressive sex, with Jones releasing all his pent-up testosterone, that was built up jousting bare-knuckled, no-holds-barred battles with ambitious Senators, Congressmen, and other bigwigs, all of whom wanted his job. As they lay in each other’s arms. Wang noticed the handcuffs that were chained to the bed. Jones liked kinky sex.

That was the first time, but it would not be the last. The next time they planned the tryst, Jones slept off after another exhausting session and Wang took her time taking in the house’s décor and fittings, especially in the bedroom. He wanted to be chained while being made love to and Wang was only too happy to oblige. While she had bedded a few Mayors, she was shocked at how easy it had been to bed what could be a presumptive President. She took detailed pictures of every nook and crevice and uploaded everything to the secure server that was housed in her dorm.

A few days later, a package arrived – in it were precise details on how to place the surveillance cameras, activate them, test them for proper operation so that clear videos would emerge. There was also a vial of clear liquid, a few drops of which mixed in a drink would knock someone out for six hours straight.

During her next visit, Wang took the devices with her. After mixing a drop in his drink, Wang settled down. By that time another session of steamy sex had ended, and Jones was knocked out. He would not wake up for six hours. Wang swung into action. She installed the cameras exactly as she was told and then texted via her burner phone that the equipment was ready for a test run. A trial run was performed that lasted close to an hour as they tested out various lighting conditions, positions in the room and with and without clothes. Every possibility was tested in detail. They were ready for the real thing.

She had been told to do the video recording the following day, since no one knew when the next sweep by the Secret Service would happen. Command Central wanted the deed videotaped and all taping devices removed after that, with no trace of they ever having been there in the first place.

The following day, a crisis in the Middle East necessitated Jones’s presence in the Strategy Room of the White House, and he had to take a rain check. That created a problem for Wang, of finding ways to remove all the devices before the next security sweep. She needed to revisit the love-nest urgently, she told Jones, since she had left behind her bag containing her term paper, she explained. She pestered Jones, also telling him how much she wanted him in her arms. More fed up than tempted, he agreed to take her back to the pad late in the night, after the Strategy Room meeting was over. She would be picked up from the campus by a Secret Service detail and discreetly brought into the love nest after he had arrived.

It was pushing 3 AM by the time she arrived at the pad. Jones was waiting but extremely tired. He was in no mood for what she wanted him to do. She scrambled around the bed making a pretense to locate the bag (it never was there in the first place).

When she came out of the restroom to leave for her dormitory, she noticed that Jones was already asleep and snoring. She quickly set about to work, removing all the cameras, and dumping them into her handbag.

Jones and Wang shared a secret messaging service – Jones used a personal email address to which Wang would send encrypted email with a password – a phrase that both had agreed to, to open it. When Jones woke up the following day, he realized that he had dozed off before Wang left. He wanted her to get back, but Wang was not ready. She would have to re-install the cameras, test them, and then collect incriminating evidence – too much to do all in one night. She begged off citing academic pressure.

It was another six weeks before they could get together again – this time Jones wanted her to stay the weekend with him.

This necessitated another session of planning and placing the secret devices and doing a dry run. The following night, the event was recorded. In order to get the worst of Jones, Wang had handcuffed the Veep and as she stripped him, made him run after her with hands and legs shacked. It was a comical sight – a middle-aged man shuffling awkwardly around the house, in chase of a stunning Chinese beauty who was teasing him one piece of garment at a time. After a few minutes, Jones was getting tired, and Wang realized that more had to be done or he would snore off again.

She allowed herself to be captured and they walked back to the master bed where they made love at the perfect angle so even the darkness could not prevent the clear contours of Jones’ face as the high-resolution FLIR cameras captured all the action in stunning detail. As they lay exhausted on the bed, Wang suggested a scotch and the ego of Jones would not allow him to say no. He told her where he kept his best scotch.

As she wandered off to get the drink in her birthday suit, she took a detour to spike his whisky with the sleep drug. Jones fell off into a deep sleep and Wang removed all the cameras, got confirmation that everything was recorded and quietly left the house after leaving a note that she had to prep for a test. The Secret Service dropped her off at the dorms.

# 11

V

ice President Jones froze to attention. The FBI said it wanted to speak with him. A Special Task Force officer of the agency met with the Veep discreetly and brought him up to speed – a young lady, whom the Veep had been seeing, could be a Chinese spy. The Bureau had information of her performing sexual acts for a couple of Mayors on the West Coast (to prove his point, the officer showed a vivid video clip to the Veep, who could only watch open-mouthed!) “How could I fall for this oldest trick,” he chided himself.

The officer saw the change in expression on the Veep’s face and knew she had nailed him too. He quickly got in touch with his superior, who in turn alerted the Secret Service Agent assigned to head the Veep’s Security Detail. An exhaustive scan of the love-nest was undertaken. No hidden devices were found but there was enough evidence left on the walls to indicate that they could have been placed and later removed.

An embarrassed Veep was left with no options. He had to give details of the sexual trysts and the Secret Service meticulously went over each date’s surveillance video for any sign of suspicious activity – shockingly, there was none. Wang was a superb actress and gave no sign of being nervous or betraying give-away emotions.

The FBI swung into action. The agency would take Wang into custody but to the utter surprise of the officers, Wang had vanished. Who had tipped her off? How did she know that the FBI was looking for her?

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Last debate with Gallagher…

As Vice President Jones paced the hotel room, trying to get his nuances right, his personal phone beeped in that special tone that he had assigned to receive a “special someone’s” text message. It was Wang, with a brief text message, “I have a surprise for you!” Also in the email was a barely clothed Wang with a message scrawled on the picture, “Click me to find out!”

Jones was drawn to the picture like a magnet, and without thinking he clicked on the image. Embedded in the picture was a malware that now got on to his smartphone. Soon it would spread to his other devices and the Chinese would know all the thoughts of Jones, including data on his previous sexual adventures.

A few days later, another secret message. In it was a video which started playing out clips from at least half a dozen trysts of his – some were videos that he thought he had kept in a safe place! One occurrence of sexual dalliance can be managed, but what the video threatened was a complete sexual record of Jones – all through the decades of his political career. Then he realized the chilling reality – someone had hacked into all his computers and to prove it to him that they had him under their thumb. Jones was in a world of hurt…

That was not all. The picture changed to a white paper with a simple text message – **Drop out of the race**.

Jones slumped in the chair and thought things over. Unlike his previous one-night stands, this was serious. He shuddered when he realized that during the last tryst, he was naked and handcuffed and chasing Wang around the house. There was no other way out. The email deleted itself so he could not even reply.

As he thought some more, he reasoned that he had come too far to be denied the prize at this juncture. He needed time. It could be a fake email, an attempted shakedown. The final debate was just two days away. With the first two tied, the final one would be a no-holds-barred fight between Gallagher and him. He decided to sleep on the matter.

The following day, another surprise awaited him. He had facilitated an energy agreement between an Eastern Bloc country and an EU nation, for which there was a $20 million kickback. The money was layered and salted away in Cayman Islands. The Protonmail he received lay bareall the accounts in which the money was, citing the last four digits of each account.

What followed next was pure Hollywood…

**Vice President Jones pulls out citing health reasons**

Reuters: In a significant development, the leading contender for the Democratic nomination, Vice President Andrew William Jones pulled out of the race, citing health concerns.

The Vice President woke up with chest pain and was taken to the Walter Reed Military Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland. After performing ECG and several other tests, the doctors issued a medical bulletin that the Veep may have suffered a panic attack from stress and the fatigue of a bruising campaign.

After meeting with his family and campaign manager, Vice President Jones decided to call off his run for the President. He is expected to retreat to his home in the countryside and convalesce for a few days. What promised to be a thrilling debate stands cancelled. Gallagher and Valdez (most likely) will be the Democratic ticket as they get ready to challenge Bill Adams.

The socialite that he had slept with two days ago was amused. “He was an insatiable stud,” she told her BFF (Best Friends Forever). “There is something that does not add up and I bet it has to do with his sexual dalliances,” she finished. The person on the other side was just making courteous noises, hoping for a tidbit that she could perhaps monetize by leaking it to the National Enquirer.

In the privacy of his home, his wife confronted him. “I know that health is not the reason you pulled out of the race. There is something else. Your health is fine enough when you go sleeping with all sorts of women, you despicable debauch!”

Jones was stunned by the slap. All her frustrations of having to bear his indiscretions in the hope of becoming the First Lady go up in smoke was packed in that stinging back hand. He tried to mouth the word sorry, but the words would not form. His facial muscles were momentarily frozen.

He thought of fiercely contesting the allegations, with the usual “my opponent will do anything” insinuation but he knew that he had been beaten. What worried him was: Would the sordid blackmail end with this, or was there more?

# 12

*Beijing - Residence of Lin Liguo*

L

in Liguo let out the barest of smiles. His normally stoic face betrayed nothing while his eyes and ears were always one of the sharpest viewing and listening posts. He knew that the Chinese Premier wanted Andrew Jones to become the next President of the United States so he could keep him under check, but the Premier had got blindsided by Liguo with his brilliant strategy of using who he thought was one of the most beautiful women on earth.

Even as his thoughts strayed to carnal desires, he shook it off. His otherwise good-for-nothing son-in-law Xi “Beijing Bob” Ming had moved Mia “Angel Face” Wang to an oceanfront guest house in the Hainan Island, facing the spectacular 108-foot-tall Guanyin Statue, a female form that represented Padmapani. The breathtaking three-faced statue jutted out to the sea and could be seen for miles.

Guanyin is the name for the Bodhisattva associated with compassion. It is short for Guanshiyin, which means ‘The One Who Perceives the Sounds of the World’. It is a belief among some Buddhists that when one of their adherents departs from this world, they are placed by Guanyin in the heart of a lotus, and then sent to the western Pure Land of Sukhāvatī.

Wang had escaped from the United States to Colombia and lay low there for eighteen months. Then she traveled by an assumed name to Paris where she spent a further thirteen months, managing to stay one step ahead of the US. A hop, skip and jump to Geneva, Switzerland, and another 15 months there. Wang then escaped to Russia and traveled by road all the way into China via Xinjiang before briefly surfacing in Shanghai. Suspecting that she might be spotted, Liguo had her whisked off to Hainan Island.

Liguo figured that by now, Ming would have slept with Wang, and hoped that he did not unleash one of his leather sex toys on her. “The first thing I am going to do when I become the next Chinese premier is to make my son-in-law disappear,” he told himself.

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Mia Wang realized that something was afoot but could not figure out what that was. On the face of it, she had no reason to complain - she was ensconced in a comfortable room and had all luxuries at her command. She had to pay for nothing. But there was only one constraint: she could not step out of the guest house and had been advised to remain in the room as much as possible. She let her gaze sweep her surroundings. Security men lurked all over, though trying to be as discreet and invisible as possible. This was not the guest house’s normal security but those that Beijing Bob had organized for her. There was no escaping, she said to herself with a sigh.

Angel Face longed to get back into action. Xi’s demanding sexual deviations were beginning to take a toll on her emotionally and physically. She was whip-smart and had not bargained for this experience when she signed up to be a spy. There were always a posse of guards around her, monitoring each and every activity of hers, not allowing her out of their sight, even when she had to perform her daily ablutions.

“But if I escape, where would I go? I am in this godforsaken island and need a Supersonic Jet to get out of here,” she told herself. She was cut off from the Internet too. Except for the local cable fare that showed re-runs of Chinese movies and shows, there was no entertainment.

“When am I going to be allowed to go?” she asked Xi one day, when they had just made love. Xi Ming was in a relaxed mood and had not even asked for any deviations. He caressed her face and smiled. “Soon,” he replied and quickly drifted into a deep sleep. Mia had drugged him and was hoping to access the Internet using his smartphone.

She tried to use his smartphone but was thwarted because the phone had a facial recognition software. She moved the drugged Xi around to make his face register but then it asked for Iris-recognition. The phone had a secondary check that required that the user see a spot on the screen and undergo a retinal scan. “Which eye?” she wondered as she forced open one eye at a time and made him stare at the screen. No luck.

There was something else the smartphone needed from the user to allow entry. Frustrated, she kept the phone on the table adjacent to the bed and started rummaging through his suitcase. “Is it possible that he may be carrying more phones or tablets or other devices?” she wondered. What about the closed-circuit TV system? Maybe someone there may have a phone to spare, she thought. But it was a fat chance, and she knew it. Frustrated after thrashing about for a few hours without success, she felt tired. She curled up in the bed.

Neither Wang nor Ming really knew what Lin was up to. Lin’s mind had been made up. The woman was of no use, and she could be dealt with when the time comes. As for his son-in-law, the fellow had turned out to be a real liability. While he could not be just wished away, Lin had been working out several plans to deal with him once he (Lin) ascended the throne of the PRC. One thing was clear: Both the woman and the son-in-law had to be ‘deleted’.

Unaware of Lin’s diabolical plans, Xi “Beijing Bob” Ming was dreaming of the day when his father-in-law would become the next Chinese premier. He disliked the pompous man but tolerated him not only because he was his father-in-law but also a potential premier material. Xi had his own plans to rise rapidly in life once his father-in-law became the new leader of all of China. It never crossed his mind that Lin proposed to kill him, though he knew that he was not much liked by his wife’s father. He believed that once Lin reached the top, he would need the likes of Beijing Bob.

Lin Liguo wanted to make his moves quickly. But he was astute and shrewd enough not to hurry. He had to wait for the right time. The US was in the midst of a Presidential election. Much of his own internal plans depended on the outcome of those polls. The incumbent Premier wanted Jones, but he had succeeded in outwitting him. “What would the Premier do next?” he wondered. He had his work cut out as he knew that he would incur the Premier’s wrath.

# 13

Three months before the election…

T

he stage was set for the grand presidential battle. On the one side was the Democratic candidate Gallagher and his Vice-Presidential choice Valdez. And on the other, was the Republican candidate Bill Adams and his running mate John Miller. And Jones was licking his wounds from the sidelines.

Miller, like Senator Valdez, had some experience in public life, as Governor of Ohio. Political control in Ohio had alternated between the Republicans and the Democrats, thus keeping Miller on his toes. It helped that by and large the non-judicial statewide officials belonged to the Republican Party. Miller’s party had a firm control in the Ohio House of Representatives; a majority of the Congressional Delegation too was made up of Republicans. And yet, the Democrats had sufficient numbers to keep breathing down its neck.

For example, the Mayors of most of the ten most important cities in the State were Democrats. And the party was consistently increasing its gains in the urban regions of the State. It was up to Miller to not only reverse that trend but also ensure that Ohio voted Republican in the coming election.

Ohio, because of its size, was a key battleground for the Presidential race. Quite a few Presidents in the past had been re-elected because of support from this State; nearly seven Presidents — all Republicans — came from Ohio.

John Miller’s story was one that clicked with the average middle-class American. He was born in a white-collar family which, while not too poor was not also very well off. In short, Miller had a difficult childhood financially. Perhaps that strengthened his determination to make it big and come out of the pits.

He went to public schools, doing well in studies. With the help of scholarships, he went to college, graduated, and later did his doctorate in Economics from Harvard. He wore horn-rimmed glasses and had a serious demeanor. In college, he was respected for his academic excellence, and his doctorate thesis soon became a definitive work that was praised by academics.

In many ways, therefore, Miller and Valdez had similarities in the challenges they faced through their rise to the top. And although those challenges were different in some ways, there was similarity in the absolute focus and commitment the two had displayed in their life.

Adams had announced his arrival as a serious candidate when he spoke at the place where Abraham Lincoln had delivered his now famous “house divided” speech. This was considered apt given that there was resentment with the incumbent government’s perceived lack of seriousness in dealing with race tensions in a non-partisan manner. The Republican candidate and his campaign team relied heavily on technology — using social media to reach out to people, the Internet to connect with people through web talks, and 3D hologram imagery to conduct rallies in places where he could not be present in person.

That he was connecting with the people became evident by his public approval ratings. Also, his team was able to ramp up its fund collection to a considerable level. The central theme of his campaign — something which his running mate Miller also hammered away relentlessly — was that change was needed at Washington DC. “Hubris has set in. People are unhappy. Social discrimination has become almost institutionalized. The great American values are being corroded,” he repeated again and again.

But he also realized that a similar pitch was being made by his opponent. Therefore, he never forgot to pitch in something dramatically new. He held strong views on American leadership globally. “We have seen that in the past two decades, the United States of America has been steadily losing ground. Few countries have respect for us, and some of them are believing in China as the new global leader. This is dangerous for the democratic order that the United States stands for and for the Americans who have fought for decades. I shall continue to fight to reverse this decline.”

On his part, Miller, while complementing his presidential candidate, never forgot to speak of his humble roots. “I understand you, your problems, your aspirations,” he would say, adding, “Candidate Adams and I have a clear plan of action to make your dreams come true. Together we shall make America great again.”

It was time for the first of the televised Presidential debates between Adams and Gallagher. After some sparring, the debate got serious.

Gallagher said, “I have plans for the economy…”

Adams interrupted, “Senator Gallagher says he has plans for the economy. What plan? The one that his party in power had followed, which has led to ruin?”

Gallagher continued, “As I said, I have plans for the economy. Unlike Mr. Adams’ Republican party, I believe in inclusive development. We are a capitalist system, true, but capitalism needs a humane face, which Mr. Adams cannot demonstrate… because he does not have one.”

Adams retorted, “Humanity is best served by empowerment, not doles.”

The discussion then moved on to homeland security. Gallagher said, “The ‘us versus the rest’ narrative the Republicans had adopted after 9/11 alienated several of our friends across the world. It also served to disengage the minority population in the United States from nation-building because those people were looked upon with suspicion.”

Adams looked shocked. “What is the good Senator proposing? That we compromise with national security? All precautions that needed to be taken were taken. We had to send across a powerful message that the United States will not tolerate terrorism, regardless of where it comes from, and we delivered.”

The debate went on for the next 30 minutes, with each candidate seeking to expose the other. At the end, it seemed that both had held their ground. The audience loved it and waited eagerly for the next round of debate, which was slated a week from then.

# 14

You could have cut the silence in the room with a knife. Adams, who was sitting across the President, stood up and sat beside him and held his hand. A few minutes elapsed as he internalized what he had just heard. He then slowly rose and went back to his sofa.

“Why me?”

“Because I see me in you, Bill! This great country of ours is going to hell in a hand basket. Everywhere I turn, I see venal, weak people compromised in one way or the other. You have enough money to not want anything from being the President. But think about your kids, grandkids, and great grandkids. They deserve all the breaks that we got, growing up, don’t they?”

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Hainan Island

M

ia Wang thought of a plan. She always did, in tricky situations, which is how she had survived thus far in life. She would somehow convince Beijing Bob to take her to Macau. She was losing weight and the plastic surgery that she had undergone to put breast implants needed adjusting. Her rhinoplasty and chin augmentation procedure too required some tweaking. She looked at herself in the mirror critically.

The entire process would take a week or two, she figured, and in that time, she could formulate an escape plan. The surgeon was the famous Dr. Mike Chen, who worked only with an exclusive clientele – CCP’s leaders’ mistresses and female spies used to honey trap persons of interest.

Dr. Chen had liked his subject Mia “Angel Face” Wang so much the last time around, that he took her to his penthouse apartment in Macao and had her sleep with him for two days. He wanted it to last longer but Mia was called to duty and had to leave in a hurry. She had promised him that she would make up for the short rendezvous the next time she dropped in.

Wang could not help but notice that Beijing Bob walked with a slight limp in his left leg. In one of the post-coitus conversations when Ming was usually in a relaxed mood, she had asked him about it, but he had shrugged it off, saying it was the outcome of a mistake he had committed in Dubai. Wang was browsing through the catalogs that were lying around when she came across an advertisement for reconstructive orthopedic surgery that claimed to have discovered new techniques of repairing torn ligaments and tendons. And the surgeons were based in Macau too.

Macau is an autonomous region located on the south coast of China, across the Pearl River Delta from Hong Kong. A Portuguese territory until 1999, it is today a major tourist destination in China, primarily due to its gambling industry. Several major and small casinos dot the bustling city, which boasts of a blend of Chinese and Portuguese culture.

Macau is called the ‘Monte Carlo of the Orient’ and ‘Las Vegas of the East’. Most visitors who come to Macau are attracted to the casino culture. Not surprisingly, gaming tax contributes to a large portion of Macau fiscal revenue.

The gaming industry accounts for nearly fifty per cent of Macau’s annual economy; in 2007, it had outdone even Las Vegas, Nevada, as the world leader in annual gambling revenue collection.

Macau is the only place in China where gambling is legal. And, while gambling draws the rich and the powerful, other ‘activities’ cannot be far behind. People go there to lose money, gain hair, shed weight and get more virile. Macau is like a life-changer for many. Consequently, several experts connected with the latest medical advances in these areas have set up base there, serving exclusive clients who prefer the best accompanied by discreetness.

The next time Beijing Bob visited Wang, she gently rubbed his limp and innocently wondered if he had considered reconstructive surgery to set right the problem.

He sighed, “Where is the time to do anything like that? My job requires my attention 24x7.”

“But now, you have spare time. Why don’t you call the doctors and set up an appointment? I too need to go to Macau, to take care of ahem, a few things,” she waved her hand over the body.

“What things?”

“Well, I am up for my next plastic surgery appointment and need to ensure that procedures are done right to perfection…” she let it tail and allowed him to imagine what that might be.

“I will need to ask Liguo for permission…”

“What makes you think that he will give it?”

“Come to think of it, he might not!” Wang could see that Beijing Bob was drifting away from the desire and she needed to get him back to dreaming of getting the reconstructive surgery done.

“Don’t tell me you can’t afford it!” Any taunt to a man’s ego instantly produced the desired results.

“It’s not that! Liguo may ask how I got rid of the limp.”

“I am sure you will find a good reason – Yoga, meditation, divine intervention…” Wang was smiling as she realized that she had hooked Ming and started reeling him in.

After thinking it over for a few hours, Beijing Bob asked, “OK, we will go. But first we need to plan everything. You will always be accompanied by two guards who will shoot first and ask questions later. They will be around you day and night at the clinic. Any indication of even the slightest variation from the accepted routine by you, and they will shoot. Are you sure you are up to it?”

It was time for Angel Face to turn on the screws. “How would you like it if one of the Party head honchos were to ask for me and find out that I am not in the best of shape, literally and figuratively?” She let the words hang for a few seconds.

The tension was building as Ming considered his options. He had not been told what to do with her. But he knew enough about the quirky behavior of the Party seniors who would change their mind on a whim. “The older they get, the more they want to complete all the chapters of Kama Sutra,” he uttered under his breath. It is better to ensure that she is in good shape than to face the music later, he told himself. Plus, this gave an ideal opportunity for him to take care of his limp too. Killing two birds with one stone, he patted himself on the back.

The arrangements were done, and they left for Macao in four weeks’ time. The trip would be for two weeks – three tops. At the end of it, Wang would be nipped and tucked, and Ming would be able to run a marathon (or so he told himself). A private jet was rented from Macao which would come down and pick them up. The plane would cover the 470-kilometer journey in little under an hour.

# 15

L

in Liguo was deep in thought as he tried to visualize all the chess games that he was playing simultaneously.

The first game was trying to guess what the Premier would do now that his choice for US President had not panned out. He could reach out to Jones to discover the reason, and upon coming to know that it was Angel Face who was the cause, would get mixed feeling*s* – happy that Jones was still in Chinese control but unhappy that he had no clue of who it was in his council that was controlling Wang.

The first person he would go to is reach out to his trusted Intelligence czar and ask him to find out who ‘owned’ Wang. Liguo hoped that he had put enough red herrings to keep the Premier guessing. But sooner or later, he would zero in on one of the top three as the offenders. Lin would face the heat then. “I will manage it, cross the bridge when I get there,” he told himself, trying to calm his rampaging thoughts. He hoped that Beijing Bob had not spilled the beans to anyone. “He is the weak link,” he grimaced inwardly*.*

The bulk of training that the People’s Republic of China does for its spies is directed at preserving that country’s national interests — it seeks commercial gains, technological secrets, and military information from abroad, especially from countries inimical to Beijing. Unlike most other countries, China usually employs academics and students, trains them in the art of spying and uses their core expertise to pry into the affairs of other nations. These young spies remain in the host country for brief periods, after which they are called backonce the task is done. This minimizes the chances of the spies getting compromised.

In fact, the use of non-traditional intelligence assets is codified in Chinese law. Honey trapping has remained a favorite tool of Chinese intelligence services. The secrecy is such that most of the information available in the public domain about Chinese intelligence agencies comes from defectors.

Artificial intelligence technology, as developed in China, is often deployed to enter into secret domains of other countries, particularly the West. China has also used spies internally — to tackle Tibet, dissidents, and other such ‘enemy’ elements. The spies are, therefore, trained in various forms of technology, besides the conventional methods.

Lin Liguo had financed Mia “Angel Face” Wang as an off-the-books operation so that no one who audits the expenses of the Secret Service department would find out where the money was being diverted. Of course, *the long* arms of the Chinese agencies could eventually read the game, but it would take a lot of digging and time. Lin reckoned that by then he would be in an unassailable position and could influence the probe. But his problem was that, despite having poured millions of dollars into the project, Xi “Beijing Bob” Ming, his son-in-law had been found wanting and reached a position where he could, due to his follies, compromise Lin’s operations.

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Jones was bored. “There is only so much golf that one can play,” he told himself as he sipped iced tea at a high-end golf course in Atlanta. He was attracting a lot of glances, looks that said, “you poor bastard, you could not get past the last line.” And that drove him crazy. Many were speculating the real reason behind his pulling out and many stories and surmises were floating around.

The Chinese Premier was not sitting idle, meanwhile. He knew that games were being played behind his back, though he did not have all the details. He had himself risen to the top position by playing those very games, and if he could do it,someone just as manipulative and ambitious could too. The Premier had directed his intelligence chief to ask their mole in the Chinese consulate in Washington, DC to make discreet inquiries on the people meeting Jones.

Jones was known to play the field but with persistent digging, the Chinese could ferret out the truth. It was not long before the mole was able to deliver a list of six lady escorts that Jones had been seeing in recent months since becoming Vice President. These women were attached to consulates of different countries — friendly and otherwise. Jones had no issues, and he did not of course know the real purpose of these associations. He was certainly not aware that Penny Marshall,a blond*,* with whom he had been having secret night-outs, was employed by the Chinese. Marshall came from a poor family and her only aim in life had been to somehow come out of her poverty-ridden life. After college, she had been recruited by the Chinese, through a Chinese student who was her classmate. She did not mind the big money that came her way, and she enjoyed the high life that opened up for her after she came into contact with Jones.

Unfortunately for her, the FBI had got suspicious about her movements, and began to dig into her finances. The probe revealed that Penny Marshall had considerable money in her account which was unaccounted. Using state-of-the-art software that had the capability of seeing through walls and bending light around corners, the Bureau traced the source of her funds to the Chinese Communist Party. Jones was discreetly informed and advised to drop her, which he did, terrified of the exposure.

After about eight weeks of digging, the Chinese spy at DC reported that he had narrowed down the suspects to two – a Lisa Fisher and Angel Face Wang. But he still could not find out who was funding them.

The Veep of the most powerful nation on earth was a prized commodity and 197 countries were on the lookout for info on him for their use. The Chinese were at the forefront of this exercise.

# 16

Lin Liguo’s residence, Beijing

I

t was not long before information reached Lin that his son-in-law Xi had left the island for an unknown destination along with Mia Wang. His trusted security person, embedded with Ming at the Hainan Island, said he was tracking the incident and did not know where the duo was headed for.

Communists never trusted anyone, including their own kith and kin, and that is how they made their way up the ladder. There was always a cross-check mechanism to ensure that the first spy (S1) did exactly as he was told. A second spy (S2), and a third one (S3) — both of whom did not know each other, were ordered to continue reporting on the first. Only and only when the stories of S2 and S3 matched was it considered to be a fact.

When he first heard of his son-in-law’s flight, Lin Liguo went ballistic – was the man along with the woman defecting or planning to do so? He immediately had his aide de Camp (ADC) call up the Air Traffic Control tower at Hainan Island to know where the plane in which the two had boarded, was headed. Macau came the answer. Lin knew there was something afoot. All options were on the table. Macau was a good enough launchpad for defection.

Beijing Bob had been told in no uncertain terms to not leave the island, yet he had dared to do just that. Since the asset he was supposed to be guarding had flown the coop with him, it became doubly important that Xi keep Lin in the loop. The more Lin thought, the angrier he became. As he was mulling his next move, his cell phone rang. His daughter An Ming was on the line. She had just received a text message that her husband was on the way to get some surgery done on his “asset.” He had not given any further details.

Liguo thought to himself, “Clever bastard! Thinks he can kill two birds with one stone; tells his wife and asks her to update me. He is trying to make it look like an emergency.”

His first thought was that, maybe, Ming tried to hurt Wang. Even as the thought crossed his mind, his jaw clenched. “Xi has crossed the line this time and I am not going to spare him,” he muttered under his breath.

An entourage of eight people deplaned from the Learjet as it touched down at a private airport in Macau. Members of all three top leaders (Premier, Bang [Bai Yang] and Liguo) were observing the deplaning passengers. The special request from Liguo to know where the plane was headed triggered the curiosity of Numeri Uno and Duo, and now all were watching who would deplane.

Angel Face checked in to the exclusive care center of Dr. Mike Chen and was given a grand suite with surgery facilities. Outside the suite stood two guards and two more had set up CCTV surveillance (they hacked into the hospital system and got the feeds) and also added their own, Infra-Red night vision cameras around the premises albeit discreetly. Nothing would escape their eagle eyes.

Cosmetic plastic surgery is done to change one's appearance — to make it better and tone down the age-factor related changes. It could be redesigning the body's contour and shape, the elimination of wrinkles or balding areas. There are also varicose vein treatments or breast augmentations available on a need basis.

There are a number of procedures men and women can choose from in order to create an image that makes them feel more confident and comfortable with their appearance.

Most patients, who desire a more youthful appearance opt for simpler, less invasive alternatives. Dr. Chen’s clinic had a modern Plastic Surgery Unit which offered several laser and chemical treatments that could help reduce the look of wrinkles, age spots (liver spots), acne scars and medical conditions such as Melasma.

Among the most popular surgeries is the cosmetic form of botulinum toxin, Botox. It is a non-surgical injection that temporarily reduces or eliminates fine lines and wrinkles. The injection blocks signals from the nerve to the targeted muscle, preventing it from contracting. These injections commonly treat frown lines, forehead creases and crow’s feet near the eyes to diminish wrinkles and smooth skin.

Then there are chemical peels to improve the skin’s appearance. Chemical peels reduce the fine lines around the eyes and mouth, treat certain types of acne, improve the appearance of mild scars, and reduce the appearance of age spots (liver spots).

It took ten days for the procedures for Angel Face to be completed. But Dr. Mike Chen wanted her to stay the full two-week course he had billed Beijing Bob, plus there was the other matter of, ahem…

Smuggling Angel Face out of the clinic would pose a problem. There needed to be a diversion so that Mia could slip away to a love nest, a penthouse apartment just a few miles away, owned by Chen. This was not the first time he would do it, and his trusted assistant Leena would create the diversion and hold the fort while the doctor slipped away with his girl.

A faulty valve set off the water sprinklers in the suite Angel Face was staying, forcing an immediate evacuation. Even the corridor sprinklers turned on, forcing the guards to run for cover from getting wet – more out of instinct than anything else.

During the ensuing confusion, Wang was whisked off to a service elevator that only a few knew of and taken down to the parking lot and into the waiting car of Mike Chen. The tinted windows of the Mercedes Dr. Chen drove would hide the passenger and thus she gave both security details the slip. With the sprinkler system on, CCTV video is blurry, and all the crew could see was a mass of bodies running about.

# 17

X

i “Beijing Bob” Ming was notified of Angel Face’s escape by his terrified security detail. His surgery had proven to be morecomplicated than originally thought, and while the specialist promised that Beijing Bob would be cured of his limp, the patient was not so sure. It hurt like hell as the ligaments and tendons healed. He had to stay for a minimum of three weeks. But a new and unexpected complication had arisen. He cursed Angel Face under his breath.

His doctor had told him, after examination, that the problem could probably not be fully resolved by knee arthroscopy — a minimally invasive technique that allows orthopedic surgeons to assess and treat knee joint problems. All that is needed are small incisions in the affected joint, and the insertion of mini camera and fiber optics to light the interior space. Pictures obtained with the camera are then projected onto a screen in the operating room. The chief advantage of arthroscopy is the ability to gain multiple views inside the joint, without damaging the soft tissues inside.

With Beijing Bob, the complication was that his knee condition was so severe that the normal arthroscopic surgery would not suffice. The man who had done the damage had done it with expertise, and with an aim to ensure that Xi suffered for the rest of his life.

As he lay on his bed, waiting for the surgery to heal, his mind was running through the worst-case scenarios – what would he tell Lin Liguo? And more importantly who kidnapped Mia? Was it the CIA or the Mossad or the FSB? What would happen next? Should he disappear too? If yes, to where?

The security detail may have erred in taking their eyes off their target, but they recovered by looking at elapsed videos. Something was not adding up – the doctor who had performed the surgery had not turned up all day, suggesting that he may be tied to the escape. The security men threatened Leena with bodily harm and forced her to part with the address of the doctor’s residence. They went there but he was not to be found. No one in the clinic knew of his love nest’s whereabouts.

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The T1 team (surveillance team of the Premier, deputed to follow Ming-Wang) consisted of two cars with two passengers each. T1 had picked up Xi Ming and Mia Wang deplane from the airport and were following them. The intent was to have one car ahead and one behind but since they did not know where Ming was headed, both cars decided to follow the car. They noticed the girl get down at the Plasticare Clinic and Ming step out for a while and return back to the car and speed off to his OrthoCare place. They decided to split up and one car followed Ming while the other was parked in the basement of the Plasticare Clinic.

Some get lucky, others make their luck, and for some luck lands in their lap. T1 team also was piggybacking on the hospital’s CCTV camera and noticed the sprinkler system turn on in one portion of one floor. They were watching the action on their tablet*,* but it was pure luck that Mia “Angel Face” Wang walked out of the elevator opposite the elevator their car was parked. They thought that it was their mark and when a screeching car came to whisk her away, they decided to follow it. A few miles later, the car turned into a gated community with skyscraper apartments. They drove past it and found a place to park and regroup.

The facial recognition software confirmed the face to be of the same person who alighted from the Learjet at the private airfield. Their boss grunted his approval and told them to stay put and await further instructions.

Beijing Headquarters of the Premier checked Mia Wang’s past, going back to her school years, before they realized that Lin Liguo had picked her for special training, and one of the first things that happened was for her to undergo plastic surgery. She was still a teen and after a whole series of operations, she looked completely different - it was as if the original had disappeared into thin air.

Trained at a special convent in Hong Kong, she learnt to speak flawless English in British and American accents, easily switching between the two. At that time, the city-state was still under British control and it was easy to hide her there for Liguo. The Premier marveled at his subterfuge and wondered how many more female spies Liguo had, stashed away.

Two days elapsed. Beijing Bob was no closer to finding the whereabouts of Angel Face and was getting desperate by the minute. In the meantime, the T1 team figured out a way to get into the gated community complex. Using state-supplied software,they cut through the layers of companies that Dr. Chen had created andfigured out where Mia was staying and decided to strike at 3 AM, in the dark of the night. The late-night shift detail tended to doze and offered the best opportunity to strike.

And strike they did. They easily overpowered the sleepy detail and sprayed anesthesia*,* as they fell into deep sleep. They would be up in twenty minutes and look at each other and pretend that nothing amiss happened. In that twenty-minute period, the T1 Team swooped into the apartment, gagged Dr. Chen and Angel Face and whisked her away. She was bundled into the waiting car and they melted into the darkness, into a private airfield and took off for Beijing. The whole operation took less than an hour.

The Premier, after having had Mia lodged at one of the secure houses, rubbed his hands in satisfaction. He had one of the trump cards of Liguo and would set about making sure that he would snuff him out for good. After it became clear that Lin was steadily enhancing his claim to the topmost leadership position — with sections of the military and the intelligences agencies backing him — the Premier decided to strike back.

He quickly co-opted his number two (Bang) and until then one of his rivals in the party, to counter Lin’s influence. Together, the two with the help of their supporters in the Army, launched a publicity slander campaign against Lin, accusing him of corrupt deals, his links with his son-in-law womanizer, and the threat that he posed to the security of China if he were to get the top job. Selective leaks to the media were engineered. The result was that Lin, already not enjoying the best of image, stood completely discredited. Now, he would have to counter not just his rivals in the Chinese Communist Party but also the backlash consequent to the public destruction and desecration of his reputation.

The Premier was satisfied with the turn of events. This was better than soiling one’s hands with the murder of an opponent — though that option always remained on the table if the situation demanded.

# 18

X

i was getting desperate. First, Angel Face had disappeared from the hospital. And now, she was nowhere to be found. As a senior member of the Secret Service, Beijing Bob had the secret service agencies at his command. True, the organizations were internally divided along political lines, but Beijing Bob had his confidants within, and they had been working round the clock to trace her. Finally, they reported to him that she may have been whisked away to Beijing.

Alarms bells began to ring in his head. That she had been taken to Beijing meant only one thing: The Premier had got hold of her and would use the opportunity to squeeze every last bit of information from her about Beijing Bob and his father-in-law. Being the opportunist that she was, Angel Face would happily spill the beans in lieu of advantages that may accrue to her. He had to warn Lin.

Beijing Bob had been following the systematic campaign to discredit his father-in-law. It was all over television, with selective leaks arranged by the Premier’s men. It was all the more reason for him to contact him. The problem was: he would have to come clean over the reasons for his Macau trip — the injury he had suffered in the knee joint. Also, he would have to bring in Angel Face and the fact that she had given him the slip. At the same time, Beijing Bob could not sit idly. He thought of doing something to restore his lost credibility with his father-in-law.

He was quite certain that Angel Face had not been taken away by the Americans, because if indeed that had happened, she would have been all over the media channels by now, looking all innocent and lost. “Stupid fools, these Americans,” he thought to himself. “They don’t realize that information is power.” It was time to connect back with Lin.

The private airport at Macau is usually a bustling place, with fancy jets of the go-getters, foreigners and Chinese, landing and taking off at regular intervals. The Chinese intelligence agencies take keen interest in the goings-on there, as it is a good place to spot troublemakers.

Beijing Bob’s men in the secret services too were part of the surveillance personnel at the busy airport. And one of his men at the airport was tipped off by a junior staff of the Air Traffic Control (ATC) that a private aircraft carrying a woman and half a dozen Beijing-based secret service agents had taken off for Beijing in the early hours. There was no passenger manifest, but Beijing Bob was sure it was Angel Face, virtually in the custody of the Premier’s men.

But it was not just the Chinese secret services which kept an eye on the happenings; the CIA too had its people there. A CIA operative had reported the sighting of Mia “Angel Face” Wang at the private strip used exclusively for top-ranking Chinese officials. Mia had been on the CIA’s radar for some time now.

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However, David Warner, the CIA chief, sat on this information. He had his reasons — the Presidential election was close, and he did not want a disclosure to influence it one way or the other. The CIA had in fact followed Angel Face all the way to the private residence that she had been deposited at.

Warner was relieved – they had been trying to find Wang since the time she fled the country. They did not know that she was hiding in Hainan Island and only picked up her trail after she landed in Macau.

The CIA chief had another motive. He wanted to avoid a scandal because, if he allowed one to erupt, it could result in a backlash, leaving to his own controversial conduct in approving and implementing extreme torture techniques against terror accused. There had already been a hue and cry over his methods, with several Congressmen seeking his ouster. Warner did not want to spoil his chances with the incoming president.

Every day, the President of the US gets a security briefing – both from CIA and then the FBI. In one of the briefings, the President was told of an imminent split in the People’s Republic of China’s leadership. His intel agency chiefs informed him that the two highest ranking leaders of the PRC, after the Premier, were ganging up against their leader, and a coup could well happen sooner or later, possibly after the Presidential elections.

The lady in question, the CIA chief added, was beautiful and dangerous, and she was in the Chinese Premier’s custody.

# 19

Lin Liguo’s residence, Beijing

L

in Liguo cracked his knuckles, mulling his next move. His source in Beijing Bob’s detail told him of Mia “Angel Face” Wang’s escape from the clinic and of the missing plastic surgeon. When Bang had gone to meet the Premier without his knowledge and spent four hours there, he had suspected as much. What he was surprised about was the intensity of the attack directed at him, with the approval of the top two. It was time to make some moves of his own, he decided.

His cell phone rang. It was a secure app that was used only between him and his son-in-law. Wondering what he would say, he decided to pick up the call.

“Salutations, *Yuèfù*, (a respectful form of addressing one’s father-in-law)” Xi started. Liguo was silent but did not hang up the phone. The son-in-law waited for a few seconds and proceeded.

“I made a big mistake, and I am extremely sorry for the same.” He decided that groveling was the only way out. “Mia had to undergo surgery because one of her implants leaked and we could not afford to wait in case it caused other complications. I realize how important she is to us and hence had to make a quick decision,” he expanded.

Lin Liguo was still silent, although he marveled at Beijing Bob’s capacity to lie. Arranging for a private plane to come to the island and booking the reservations in Macau would have required a fair amount of planning and the fact that Xi managed to do all that without anyone else knowing about it intrigued him. “Maybe he is not entirely worthless,” he told himself. Aloud, he let out a grunt that usually meant that the “jury-was-out” on what he had heard.

Encouraged by the response, Beijing Bob ploughed on. “*Yuèfù*, we can counter these allegations easily and effectively. I happen to have video recordings of the Premier instructing the Governor of Xinjiang in detail what to do with the Uighur prisoners. There is a tirade of about 10 minutes where he commands the Governor to separate the men from the family and for Han (pure Chinese) soldiers to live in the houses from which the men were taken away and to impregnate the light haired, light-eyed Uighur women, so they would bear Han offspring. The entire Ethnic cleansing tirade goes on and on and it will set the Internet on fire, when delivered with the translations,” he finished excitedly.

Lin had heard of the existence of such a conversation from some people in the party but not personally heard it. “Send me the voice clip. You need to go to Hong Kong right away to facilitate this to the Western world. Do not leave the Orthocare in a car – use the public transportation that the staff uses to get to the terminus, and I will have someone pick you up and take you to a secure house in Hong Kong. You will be safe there and can co-ordinate all the media releases and the reactions. This is your last chance.”

“I will not let you down, *Yuèfù*,” Beijing Bob replied reverentially. “We will hit back hard.” Even as he was finishing up, he heard the click of the phone line being cut off. He had his marching orders. Time to move.

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Ensconced in the secret safe house, located on the 45th floor of a breathtaking apartment located near the Victoria Peak, Beijing Bob began to act. He had to still walk with a special cast to protect his knee and was told that as long as he had it on during the time he was awake, the knee should heal.

He went over the video, one more time. He wanted to ensure that every word reflected the contempt and derision the Premier had for the Uighurs and to ensure that the shock of listening to the Premier’s voice would give even the most neutral observers a sense of the gloomy future that awaited the minority community.

His plan was to call an online press conference and lay out the grounds painting the Premier in “true light”, as he called. Once the audio clip plays out, all hell would break loose and he needed to ensure that Lin Liguo was at a safe place, beyond the reach of #1 and #2.

But, knowing the Premier, he anticipated that the Online Press Conference would be yanked offline within moments of it starting. To ensure that the West got the information, Ming uploaded the Press Conference along with the incriminating audio evidence and transcript on a secure server based in Switzerland and sent a Protonmail to a couple of powerful editors in the United States that he trusted.

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Lin Liguo was safely ensconced in a high-rise apartment in Taipei, Taiwan. He had left Beijing as soon as he finished the call with his son-in-law. The move was imminent and unlike Chiang Kai-Shek, Lin Liguo intended to return to Beijing as the legitimate Premier. Kai-Shek had been outwitted by the communist party and had to contend with holding Taiwan, which China to this day claims as its own.

It was in January 1912 that the Republic of China was established with Sun Yat-sen of the Kuomintang being proclaimed as the provisional President. But there were divisions that threatened the newly formed republic. In the late 1920s, the Kuomintang, under Chiang Kai-shek, the then Principal of the Republic of China Military Academy, reunified the country under its own control with a series of military and political maneuverings.

But the political divisions in China made it difficult for Chiang to counter the communist People's Liberation Army (PLA), against whom the Kuomintang had been battling since 1927 in the Chinese Civil War. The distrust between the Kuomintang and the Communists continued, and in 1949, the communists under Mao Zedong had taken control of mainland China, with the Kuomintang retreating offshore to Taiwan and retaining control of the region.

Lin Liguo got a secure text message – the Press Conference was set for Monday morning 10 AM, local time. It would be late evening in DC but not so late that most of the East coasters would have gone to sleep.

As Xi expected, the Press Conference got cut off within seconds of its starting and the Security Police had come knocking on his doors. But his precaution of sending the data in advance to the West-based Editors and sending an SOS to them that he was being taken into custody, set off an avalanche of events. The US would wake up to their Monday morning to know of the awful details on how the Premier had planned to eliminate a complete race.

Beijing Bob knew that his father-in-law would have no use for him once this deed was done. He would be safe in prison in the hands of the Premier, who might want to keep him alive, just in case. But he also wanted to show the Premier that his being in prison did not mean that he could not do anything.

Two weeks after the first bombshell appeared, there was another tape of the Governor of Xinjiang, exhorting his troops to seek out doctors, to train them to use the new facility that was in place in [Ürümqi](https://www.bing.com/search?q=%25c3%25bcr%25c3%25bcmqi&filters=ufn%253a%2522%25c3%25bcr%25c3%25bcmqi%2522+sid%253a%2522cb1338dc-6380-e6bf-3c6f-a2338d9b96b3%2522+gsexp%253a%25228e7874f1-5a52-a168-5737-ced81488dfca_bXNvL2xvY2F0aW9uLmxvY2F0aW9uLmFkbWluaXN0cmF0aXZlX2NhcGl0YWx8VHJ1ZQ..%2522&FORM=SNAPST), the capital of Xinjiang province. Detailed lists of first batch of Uighur candidates were being circulated and the donor-user information was shared along with detailed timetables on who would be needed to perform what kind of surgery. The thirty-minute meeting detailed the chilling logistics that the PLA and CCP had put in place for its citizens, how much they knew of each one’s strengths and weaknesses and the avarice of the rich from the West and the Oil-rich sheikdoms who preferred to get organ transplants from non-pig meat eaters.

The CIA had meanwhile gotten involved as soon as it knew that Liguo was headed for Taiwan. A couple of F-35s flew out of the aircraft carrier patrolling the Taiwan straits and accompanied Liguo’s aircraft to Taipei as soon as it crossed China’s airspace.

The following day’s security briefing was owned by the CIA. It showed the President the benefits of protecting its (now) most valuable asset, Lin Liguo.

A cryptic message was put out by the White House that it was following the developments in China closely. The incumbent President had imposed sanctions against China, and Beijing was hoping that President’s favorite candidate Bill Adams would lose. However, there was a catch: most polls placed Adams ahead of the Democratic challenger Gallagher.

# 20

The White House

J

ack Edwards, Director of the FBI, caught up with his CIA counterpart, David Warner, as the meeting came to a close in the Oval Office and they were leaving. Warner had just revealed the palace intrigues in Beijing and Edwards wanted to know a little more than what was disclosed at the meeting. The months leading to the election were critical. He had heard some murmurs about Lin fleeing to Taipei but not a word about that had escaped the lips of the CIA Director.

“One has to be careful to ensure one’s attitude appears impartial,” Edwards told himself, as he got up to leave. He wanted to draw up a strategy for a possible fallout in China but intended not to mention the specifics. Instead, he chose to take the circular route of verbal gymnastics and knew that Warner would answer his questions in the same manner.

Warner smiled. “Yes, Jack?”

“You know that a kingdom cannot have two kings, right?”

Warner raised an eyebrow and smiled. “Your point being…”

“Now that there are two factions, one of them is going to need our backing, I would think…”

“One would think so… Naturally.” The CIA chief was being true to character, revealing nothing.

“Assuming that to be true, should one prepare to draw up a list of concessions one should demand for providing one’s support?”

“One may already have done so,” Warner replied crisply.

“Would one be able to add a line or two?”

“Such as?”

“One investigation that concerns one’s nation is incomplete and can make great progress if one individual is interrogated in the right way.”

Warner understood. Edwards was upset that the Bureau had sprung a leak that led to Mia “Angel Face” Wang escaping the United States before the FBI swooped in. Edwards wanted her back in the US to question her on her other liaisons.

Edwards had information that another senior US politician was embroiled in the honey web of Mia Wang and could be within a whisper of the Presidency. While only rumors and no sightings thus far, should there be truth in the matter, then Wang would surely know where the proof of such trysts was kept.

According to the FBI, the politician was Victor Valdez, the Vice-Presidential candidate of the Democratic Party. The FBI had reasons to suspect that he had slept with Wang and broken it off when Mary Valdez learnt of it. Valdez was young, handsome, and constantly drawing admiring glances from the socialites in and around Washington DC. Many an attractive college grad was found to be interning at the Senator’s office.

But the FBI did not have clinching evidence of Valdez’s association with Mia. Only she would be able to provide it, and so the Bureau needed to get its hands on her, figuratively speaking. The FBI was convinced that the data was not yet in the possession of the Chinese intelligence but with Mia herself, perhaps in a Swiss locker. The girl was smart — and who knows what else was in store!

The Bureau was of course aware of the various other flings that Valdez had had, but they were not of the kind that flagged off national security issues. The Senator, for instance had been indulging in sexual capers with a smart and young law graduate, a brunette from a top law school. There was another, a blonde this time, who had majored in mass communication. Both these young women were ambitious and looking for big breaks in the inner circle of power. Through Valdez’s contacts, they knew they could make it big, and had no qualms in extending sexual favors to the Senator. Valdez always found time and place for it when the Senate was in session, and during late hours of the day. It would be in his office room. Outside too, there would be discreet locations where Valdez spent time in their company.

Unknown to Valdez, his fling with Angel Face happened around the same time she was having a fling with Vice President Andrew Jones. Mia had tried a different tack with Senator Valdez*,* as being a person who could bring high net worth donors for the campaign. The first few visits were genuine, and some money came into the kitty; the meetings took place with his Chief of Staff in attendance and were simple requests that he could deliver on easily.

For example, relaxation of restrictions for a period of five years on a new chemical plant that a Chinese conglomerate was putting up in his state, in exchange for creating two hundred well-paying jobs, etc.; tax holiday for profits repatriated to the parent company for two years; letters of recommendation for a business magnate’s son / daughter for admission into Harvard… and so on.

Thereafter, once the comfort level was reached, the trysts began to happen as if by chance – when no one was at the office, Mia would drop by since she ‘happened’ to be in the neighborhood and wanted to know if she could schedule an appointment. One thing led to the other, and soon they were sleeping.

Valdez suspected her of being a spy all along and refused to meet her anywhere but at his office, thinking that since it is swept frequently for bugs and other recording devices, he would be safe. But he had not bargained on how resourceful Angel Face was – she had arranged for miniaturized cameras that would work even in dark light while the two copulated on a sofa.

Meanwhile, while Mary could not eliminate the issue, she tried to minimize it. She had her own instincts about the Senator and ensured that interns were frequently rotated. While the Senator was on the road, there were a few people that she trusted to keep him walk the straight and narrow.

A Senator had around two dozen of his own staff. Budgets for them were determined by the population of the state, the bigger the population, the larger the budget. Members could choose how to distribute staff between their Washington office and their district home office.

Mary had people among Valdez’s personal staff who kept her updated on his activities beyond the professional. She used the information to keep him on a tight leash, although not entirely succeeding in the endeavor.

# 21

*In one of his first meetings with the Professor from Stanford, the Chinese Premier had laid down the expectations – “Do the following for me and we will call it even. You can go back to living your normal life.”*

*He was not sure that the Premier would keep his word, but what choice did he have? One moment of madness in his youth was costing him dearly…*

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Mia “Angel Face” Wang at a safe house in Beijing

M

ia Wang had mixed feelings. She felt happy that she looked as good, if not better, than she did two years ago. She had turned thirty and could see that she needed to watch every bite she ate. Thankfully, a fish-based diet that she preferred helped her keep her weight in check. But still…

Age may be just a number, but that number does things to the human body, especially a woman’s body. There is an increase in weight despite attempts to contain it; there is a 50 per cent reduction in fertility chances; and there are hormonal changes that may not be all for the good. The skin begins to stiffen with the reduced production of collagen and skin protein. Mia had a challenge ahead of her.

She had planned to flee from Macau with Dr. Chen’s help, and had almost pulled it off. She had just started conversing with Dr. Chen on how he could perhaps perform a simple surgery that would make her look different and fool the facial recognition software that China employed to trace people. The two and a half days spent at Dr. Chen’s place were not long enough for her to twist him around her finger, but she felt that she was making considerable progress.

But the plan was foiled after the Chinese Premier’s security swooped in and whisked her off. She was now in an even bigger and more secure fortress, from which there appeared to be little chance of escape.

An elderly lady took care of all her needs, and indeed she had everything she needed or demanded. However, it was like a golden cage – a lot of security detail and all the books and music that the place was stacked with, was of Chinese propaganda, of which she became sick and tired of, within the first two days. She felt like she had jumped from the frying pan into the fire. There was nothing to do till someone from the Premier’s office approached her and talked to her. Perhaps then there would be an opening.

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The Chinese Premier berated his security officer, who had let Lin slip through his fingers. “You should have known the software Lin was using to talk to Xi… how could you be so careless?”

The officer bowed his head and did not say anything for a few moments. Then he replied, “Lin-*ye* was a clever man, always one step ahead of us. Every conversation with his son-in-law had a different method of encryption. We never had enough time to decode what was discussed…”

“I need results, not excuses. The American F-35 fighter jets escorted him to Taiwan as soon as his Learjet exited our space, which means it was planned well. It also means that the Americans are protecting him, most likely in a secret place in Taipei, where they will wait till they can parachute him back here in Beijing…” The Premier tailed off. It was as if he was thinking loudly.

The incident had implications. Would Lin betray his secrets to the Americans? If yes, will there be a palace coup and the Premier and Bang be deposed and sent to the Mongolian desert? Or worse, could they face an execution squad? Can he trust the security officer in front of him?

Paranoia had set in. The Premier now had to take the step that he found distasteful but necessary. He had to have a rapprochement with the number two and three, his rivals. He directed his staff to sound off his two rivals, telling them that both need to be told that the Premier had something of mutual interest to discuss with them.

This was not something that needed to be done in full public view. A secret teleconferencing was set up with only a handful of the closest aides of the three leaders involved. The Chinese Premier had two bargaining chips — Angel Face and Beijing Bob — and Lin was equipped with incriminating material on both number one and number two. The problem was in getting hold of Lin to speak. Beijing Bob was told that he would be free for life if he arranged a discussion with Lin. But Xi did not take the bait. He wanted a safe passage out of China for himself and his family.

After a great deal of back and forth, it was decided that Beijing Bob and his family would be put on an aircraft headed for Taipei. Once the plane was safely out of Chinese airspace, he would call Lin and patch a call with the Premier. There would be F-35s escorting the plane to land in Taipei. That done, Lin was patched into the conversation.

One problem had been taken care of, but the rivalry between the Premier and his other worthy rival was still on the table. Bang was furious. He addressed the Premier and said, “It is all because of you that we have landed in a soup. You could not take care of Lin and allowed the mess to be created by Beijing Bob and that lady.”

The Premier responded, “Don’t forget that your ambitions also contributed to the incident. Our rivals have taken advantage of the bad blood between us. If only you had woken to the ground realities and not allowed your blind ambitions to rule your head, nobody would have dared to challenge us in this manner.”

Bang retorted, “You allowed Lin to acquire the larger-than-life image, making him in charge of the secret services.”

“And you,” the Premier, replied, “used every opportunity you got to undermine me instead of standing by my side in times of crises.”

The vitriolic verbal exchange continued until both the leaders were exhausted, and the reality sunk in that, if they did not hang together, they would hang separately. The Americans were just waiting for the catastrophe to happen. The Premier cleared his throat and said, this time with his voice lowered, “Look, we can keep fighting till the cows come home, and nothing will be achieved. We have to bury the hatchet and unitedly confront the real enemy, the United States of America.”

Finally, a compromise was reached. Numeri 2 and 3 would be made Deputy Premiers, with each having a separate area of jurisdiction, residing in cities away from Beijing (Bang got Shanghai as his fiefdom while Lin Liguo had Shenzhen, being close to Hong Kong and Macau). Shanghai is where the money is, Shenzhen is where money meets the outside world, while Beijing is where the power is. It was a win-win deal for everyone.

Liguo thought to himself, “I control the finances that flow in and out of China. In one stroke, I can completely cutoff all the money to the country. This is how I will control him.”

Bang muttered under his breath, “All of China’s thinkers are here in Shanghai and it is the thought that matters. I can move the minds and through them shape the destiny of this great nation.”

Premier let out a rare smile as thought, “Both are fools. They think they can control me – it is however I that can play one against the other and will use technology to plant false stories so at all times, they will be at each other’s throats; I will rule peacefully from here.”

# 22

Hong Kong

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he cell phone kept ringing. Susan Sanders ignored it the first and the second time and let it go to voicemail, but when it persisted a third time, she snapped out of her sleep and picked it up.

“This better be good,” she said cryptically.

“You have an hour to pack your bags and take a US Military flight to DC. There will be a brief stop in Germany at Ramstein air base while they take in more passengers and then it is onwards to DC.”

“What on earth for?”

“I haven’t the slightest clue. The orders came right from the top. They wanted to talk to you, and only you. I am thinking it is because you were trying to track down Angel Face Wang.”

“Hmm. She is quite a character…”

“Listen, I am sorry I had to wake you up within three hours of your getting home, but it looks like there is a situation in the mainland. Lin Liguo has fled to Taipei and from what little I have been told, furious arguments ensued between him and the Premier, and after that there appears to have been some kind of an understanding that they have arrived at…”

Her boss continued. “I am on my way to pick you up from your apartment and will brief you on what I have so far. Be ready in an hour,” he hung up before she could get a word in edgewise.

Susan Sanders leapt out of her bed. The news had energized her. She had a score to settle. As one of the CIA’s chief operatives based in Hong Kong, she had been tasked with keeping an eye on Mia, never letting her out of surveillance. Sanders was fluent in Mandarin and Chinese customs and traditions. While in school she had opted to learn Mandarin as she was fascinated by the culture of one of the world’s most ancient civilizations. She went on to study Mass Communications at Columbia University, specializing in Oriental languages.

Her proficiency in the subject drew the attention of a CIA head-hunter; besides, she had excelled in general academics too. She was good-looking and smart, and seemed the kind to be interested in unconventional careers.

The CIA headhunter had sought, discreetly, a meeting with her. Of course, for the public record, he represented himself as a human resource development chief of a multinational corporation. He met Sanders in the coffee shop of a leading starred hotel. This was in Washington DC. It did not take Sanders long to realize that he was not what he was pretending to be.

The CIA handler then came clean and offered her a job as a CIA operative. “You will be trained in the basics of espionage. You will be doing yeoman service to this great nation by accepting it,” he said. Sanders did not need much convincing; she joined the Agency and was posted to Hong Kong after undergoing training at DC. It was after she signed up and put into training that she understood the tough road ahead.

She learnt that the CIA recruited from among the best in the universities, and this included excellence in academics. The other plus points were proficiency in a foreign language and stints abroad. The candidate would naturally need to have a clean record — no detentions, no drugs etc. These were no problems for Sanders, anyway. She completed the Criminal Investigation Training Program at the Federal law Enforcement Training Center in the first year of her employment.

She was also trained as a new recruit in the CIA’s Clandestine Service Division, at the highly classified Camp Peary, which is a sprawling military camp near Williamsburg. She was initiated in all possible clandestine activities — such as telephone bugging; working in safe hideouts to give and receive information; handling a range of firearms and explosives of all kinds; cartography; interrogation methods, counterterrorism tactics, etc.

Sanders also served at the CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia, where she was, besides other things, told of the hazards of the job she was undertaking. It was only at the end for nearly five years of hard grind that Sanders was deemed equipped by the CIA top brass to be finally inducted as a field operative. “You will be in virtual enemy territory,” her boss reminded her, when he informed her of her posting in Hong Kong.

For the first three months in Hong Kong, Sanders soaked in the environment and made herself comfortable, doing routine work such as keeping an eye on immigrants and understanding the functioning of the Chinese power structure. The next three years just flew by. With increasing tensions between the island and Mainland China, she was busy just trying to keep track of pro-democracy activists as the CCP honed in on them like a laser.

Then came a phone call from her handler, who briefed her on her first major task: Surveillance of Mia “Angel Face” Wang. Sanders began to follow her movements and traced her to Shanghai. It was a logistical challenge – she could not easily slip into and surveil in Shanghai, one of the largest cities in China. Her blond hair and blue eyes made her easy to spot. She had to make do with local resources, who were at best semi-reliable. Then the subject disappeared; Mia had given her the slip. Rush hour traffic in Shanghai ensured that she could mingle into the crowds and melt away.

It was a blow to her image, but she was determined to redeem herself. Then luck dawned on her. Wang was sighted alighting from a private plane in Macao with a man with a limp, who she knew was MSS (Chinese Ministry of State Security) and that he was related to Lin Liguo.

Sophisticated Electronic surveillance alerted her when Mia was whisked off to the mainland in the wee hours of the night. It helped that the CIA had hacked into the ATC software and kept miniature video devices which captured everyone entering or exiting the private airfield that even the most paranoid Chinese could not detect. She swung into action and had tracked her all the way to the safe house in Beijing with a 24x7 discreet surveillance using highly miniaturized drones which looked no bigger than a 2-inch-long gnat and could transmit crystal clear imagery back to her in Hong Kong.

Over the decades, the CIA had mastered the art of surveillance. and for some years now, it had also done pioneering work in cyber surveillance, monitoring computer activity of people spread across the globe, including, especially the Chinese. Much of its cyber spying involved checking personal data and traffic on the Internet. To this end, the CIA had the support of the Communications Assistance for Law Enforcement Act, which mandated that all phone calls and Internet traffic could be available for real-time monitoring by Federal law enforcement agencies.

However, even for a humongous organization like the CIA, keeping track of millions of chunks of data, called ‘packets’, is humanly impossible. Therefore, the agency’s surveillance system is designed to flag information that is deemed ‘interesting’ to the spy system — information that may use certain types of words or phrases, or be related to certain kinds of web sites, etc. While countries such as the US policed cyber traffic to keep abreast of developments that it considers relevant to national security, some countries with dictatorial regimes use cyber policing to track down and suppress dissent.

The call for Susan Sanders had come after her boss Warner and senior personnel in the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) decided that they be briefed by her in person on the Mia Wang issue. An important matter on the agenda was the possibility of getting her out of Beijing and into the US for questioning.

# 23

“Of the nine states that were now thought of swing states, only twenty-one counties are critical – the way they vote decides who becomes the President,” said the Professor. The Chinese Premier was pleased. “This is going to be easier than I thought,” he told himself.

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anders had a forgettable flight. The cargo plane, in which she had been transported for security reasons, did not have much of anything – it was noisy, bouncy and came with minimum comfort. The two-hour layover in Ramstein Air Force Base helped her stretch and take a quick shower. After landing at DC, she snatched a few hours of sleep and got ready for her meeting with the Big Boss.

In a meeting that had just Warner, Edwards, Phil Bronkowski and Sanders, Warner did the introductions and explained the reason for the meeting. “We have to tackle Wang sooner than later,” he said, adding, “She holds the key to much of what the Chinese are planning. As we all know, though it has not been officially confirmed, one of our Presidential candidates withdrew from the race due to his liaison with her. There could be other connections too. We must know what she knows.”

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Phil Bronkowski was born in a farming family in rural Kansas and grew up being a basketball star at high school. He got a sports scholarship to go to the University of Kansas but realized that he wanted to catch the bad guys more than net the ball in the hoop.

Academics had been an equally strong passion along with basketball. He did well in studies at the university and decided to take the entrance test for the FBI. When the Bureau came calling to the campus, he was among the ones they talked to. He breezed through the interview, impressing the selectors with his single-minded focus and determination.

Like Susan Sanders, he too realized soon enough that behind the glamour of being an operative of a federal intelligence agency was hard work, at times so frustrating that the less determined quit midway. He received training in the basics, which included hundreds of hours devoted to Web-based courses, academics, case studies, firearm training and operational skills. Bronkowski became quite popular at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia, because of his basketball skills,for which he found time from the packed schedule to demonstrate. He was also an easygoing guy, which belied the nerves of steel he demonstrated during the training.

Along with the recruits, he gained proficiency in combat methods, operations and counter-operations, the use of firearms, surveillance techniques, cyber security etc. Needless to add, a significant part of the training was devoted to physical fitness and interrogation techniques. Once the training was over, he spent over six years in various States across the US, learning paperwork — the FBI, one must remember, operates also like a bureaucracy where rules and procedures are sacrosanct — at least up to a point.

Ten years into service, he had gotten lucky. The Wang-Jones affair surfaced under his watch and just when he was getting all the paperwork done to apprehend a foreign student enrolled in Georgetown University, she had flown the coop. If it were not for the pedantic paperwork that he had to get signed to nab the woman, he would have apprehended her before she escaped.

There seemed no love lost between Bronkowski and Sanders. She fired the first salvo, addressing him, “So you are the guy who let Wang slip through your fingers…”

“Oh yeah?”, he retorted. “How about you? How did you lose her in Shanghai?”

“But I managed to catch up with her in Macau and now she is under my surveillance…”

The meeting had truly started. Over strong coffee and hot scones (Sanders was appreciative of the choices the breakfast buffet had in the Director’s office – and wolfed down a few scones as if she had come from a drought ravaged area in the Sahara). If Warner ate like this every day, she wondered, how many hours didhe work out to maintain his trim shape*?*

Warner stepped in. “Folks let us not quibble. We have met to discuss important matters. It will not do for one arm of the government trying to cut another. We must work together, pool our resources and intelligence.”

He let that hang for a few seconds and allowed for the temperatures in the room to drop and then added diplomatically, “Slip-ups happen to all of us. There is no shame in admitting it. But we have to be extra careful with each lesson we learn.”

Sanders confirmed that Mia was still holed up in Beijing. This time, she said, she had built up triple redundancy to ensure that even if Mia were to give her the slip on one method of surveillance, a second and a third would kick in.

Edwards now spoke out. “We have to wait for the elections to conclude and may have to whisk her away at a moment’s notice. If there is any intel that you can unearth from there, please share them at once with Bronkowski. The FBI needs to be prepared for any eventuality.”

Sanders was confused. “Why is the FBI showing so much interest in Wang?” She wondered aloud. What was that ‘eventuality’ the FBI was hinting at? There was silence over her remarks. And then the penny dropped!

Somebody else had also been honey-trapped. And that somebody could in fact come to power, and the agency was being both cautious and proactive.

# 24

A decade ago…

V

enezuela’s Socialist leader Tony (Anthony) Martinez had forced the country to adopt a socialistic model and started giving freebies out of the revenues his nationalized corporations were generating. Soon, people stopped working as money arrived as dividend every month. Even the able and willing shunned and got complacent on government handouts. But as global oil prices fell, the subsidies could not be maintained. And when they were marginally cut, a vast mass of people rose in revolt.

As things became worse, Martinez not only had to restore the money but top it by an additional 5 percent across the board. As global oil prices plunged from $150 per barrel of crude to $28, Venezuela just did not have the money power to fund its population sops. A large cause of the crisis was the flawed economic model that Martinez had followed in his pursuit to be seen as a Socialist par excellence. His politics led to the country’s economic ruin.

For example, one of his political ideologies rested on his visceral hatred for private enterprise. He had gone about nationalizing everything — from natural resources to road construction to car manufacture. The number of private companies had dwindled by half in just a decade. The nationalized entities, top heavy with political appointees who knew nothing about running a business, became loss-making enterprises. Private investments, both domestic and foreign, took flight out of the country, further crippling the economy.

Companies need investment to grow and hire new workers. One of the biggest failures of the Martinez government had been to drive away both domestic and foreign investors. Martinez’s policies drove a number of Venezuelan companies to Colombia, Panama, and the United States.

Martinez, who had been riding high on oil export revenues, came crashing down to the ground. The fall in crude oil prices had damaged his country’s finances to a large extent. Over the years, the country’s income from exports had become heavily dependent on oil — up from 75 percent of total exports ten years ago to 97 percent presently.

The catastrophe had a spiraling impact on other parameters as well. Inflation had averaged at more than 20 percent over the last seven years, and the Martinez government’s price controls had given rise to a flourishing black-market economy. As a consequence, violence and rioting had become the norm on the streets of the country, especially the capital Caracas, as citizens, disgruntled and angry with the turn of events, poured on the streets and chanted for the downfall of the government.

The only option left with the beleaguered Martinez was to print more notes to contain the damage. But the American creditors, who had extended large loans to the government to build the oil refineries, reneged on witnessing the economic slide and began calling back the loans. This reduced the crude being pumped from the refineries as critical equipment got hauled away. Additionally, the currency started getting devalued rapidly.

Since Venezuela did not produce everything it consumed, this drove up the prices of essential commodities. At first it was inflation but soon it turned to hyperinflation and all hell broke loose. Within just six months, Martinez went from a loved man of his people to the most hated person on earth for them. And there was the little matter of elections that had to be held.

It was in this dismal situation that Martinez was in New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly session. His Finance Minister had failed to convince his creditors that Venezuela could pay its debts. Fuming at the humiliation, Martinez delivered a stirring speech running down capitalism in general and the US in particular.

The Chinese Premier heard the speech on television and smiled. He could do with an ally in Latin America — one that had been pushed to the wall and could be easily manipulated to counter the West, especially the US.

The Premier had been briefed that Venezuela still possessed a lot of crude and some rare earth elements which could be worth a lot someday. A meeting was arranged on the sidelines and a quick quid-pro-quo deal was signed. China would pay Venezuela’s debts in exchange for a 10-year lease on the latter’s productive oil basin. China would build more plants and would transfer them after a 10-year period of operation. In exchange, it would get America off Venezuela’s back.

The Chinese establishment was, of course, doing what it had done with success elsewhere in the world, particularly in Africa, where it had used its economic might to not just win over lucrative deals for its cronies but also effectively ensured stakes in the region’s political system.

Martinez was a smart man and knew he was getting a raw deal from the Chinese. But he had no other choice. The problem was that his National Executive Council had to approve the agreement, and he had only a razor thin majority there. There were leaders who were ready to dump him at the first opportunity they got — leaders who were under tremendous pressure from their disenchanted constituents to break ranks.

In a two-part deal that was signed, an early loan was given so that Martinez could distribute another round of sops, making it look like everything was hunky-dory. He would then call for snap elections riding on the handout and return to power. He would then cede all the promised concessions.

In order to ensure the return of Martinez (given that he was hugely unpopular), the elections were rigged. The Chinese Premier used his indirectly owned company Digitalis for this purpose. Based on the polls leading up to the elections, the Digitalis programmers had calculated that, if Martinez’s votes were weighted 1.31 and his opponents’ 0.69, then Tony would come back to power easily. Since the total number of votes cast would not change, the observers and election personnel would be none the wiser.

And that is exactly what happened. Martinez roared back to victory, much to the chagrin of the voters and the Opposition, which was sure that Martinez would be rejected.

China got to sink oil wells in some of the richest oil basins of Venezuela and started pumping crude at rock bottom prices. Within a few months of returning to power, Martinez was diagnosed with lung cancer and had to fly to Cuba for treatment. Since he did not trust anyone to keep the chair warm while he convalesced, he tried to rule from Cuba.

But soon things got out of control and the people came on the streets in protest. Tony did not last long and passed away in Cuba. Since the new oil wells were mostly offshore, guarding them was not an issue. China cleaned up big and on top of that, got Digitalis validated on a 30-million populace. It was now ready for Prime Time.

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Fast forward… Davos Speech

The usual gathering of the high and mighty of the world in Davos, Switzerland had a special tinge this time around. Billionaire Matt Woods was the keynote speaker and what a speech he gave! In his vision for the world, where he advocated a borderless world, with people being free to live wherever they wanted, with no borders. To this end, he observed that the World was turning back to “Nationalism” when all trade had become global. Anyone that Woods felt was espousing Nationalism in her or her country was a target that should be brought down.

To reinforce his observation, he singled out the leader of India, Jadeja and the President as making their countries nationalistic, making them more insular. Whether it was because it ran counter to his idea of a Free Society without Borders or not was moot. That he had money to put behind his mouth was not. He concluded his speech with a grand statement – that he would give away half of his wealth to oppose and bring down such regimes. The gauntlet was thrown.

The Chinese Premier watched the speech with interest and decided that he would spend more time talking to Matt Woods on his ideas of a Free Society. He appeared to be a “useful idiot”, a term that Vladimir Lenin had used contemptuously of non-communists who aligned themselves with their political positions.

After that speech, the Chinese Premier instructed his Intelligence Czar to start following Woods’ initiatives in the political arenas of the world. With money to burn, Woods invested in media entities in the US and India. They had only one instruction – be as critical of the President or Jadeja; find every fault and amplify it. Embellishing the truth was fine – he called it “drawing outside the lines.”

Jadeja had issues on so many fronts that he ignored the vitriol poured on him by the antagonistic media. One in particular went way outside the lines – he took the troop movement of a battalion from Agra to Delhi and described it as an attempted coup! What ended up because of this was that of the 100 people who read the Editor, thirty stopped. But the Editor knew which side of his bread was buttered. Woods had his office send him a note – nice try, next time be more realistic.

Woods focused on the swing states that won the election for the President in the last election and got to work on how to ensure that they would vote the way he wanted. It never occurred to Woods that the policy he was pursuing would put the United States Democracy at risk. The system prided itself on being able to manage its elections with all the quirks that came with each state and country.

There were some states that had super-long ballots. California was one of them – the state had to vote on every spending measure that the government wanted to take up. This built up over time and currently almost 85 percent of the state budget was already committed; regardless of who became the Governor.

# 25

Thirty months to the election

D

r. Henry Lee had obtained his Ph D (Doctor of Philosophy) degree in Computer Science from Stanford University. He specialized in cryptography, encryption, ethical hacking, and other related topics. He was one of the few brilliant Ph Ds that Stanford made an exception and offered him a position as faculty in the University.

A serene lifestyle in Silicon Valley, being an advisor on several boards started by his students and profiting handsomely from the Initial Public Offerings of some of them, meant that by the time he had turned 40, he was set for life. His children were entering high school and were headed for Ivy League schools. His wife was a tiger-mom who made sure that the kids walked the straight and narrow path of truth and honesty.

Fate has a cruel way of puncturing one’s life. Many years ago, as a student at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, Dr. Lee fancied himself as a liberal, and would take part in several pro-democracy demonstrations as the day for the evacuation by the British of the island nation neared. In one such demonstration, the crowd was teargassed, and Lee was one of the students who fell down and was trampled upon. It started raining and that helped disperse the crowd somewhat. Lee saw a brief let up and tried to get up. He was wobbling on his legs, hurting from all the blows when he saw a cop on a motorcycle headed straight for him. He looked left and right and realized there was no escape route. The cop wanted to run him over.

Lee’s instincts took over. Instead of curling himself into a ball to absorb the impact of the motorcycle, he decided to leap at the driver. Not expecting this, the motorcycle cop realized too late that his intended victim was doing a crouching tiger maneuver. The next few moments were a blur… Lee’s shoe connected with the cop’s neck and the impact because of the forward momentum of the bike was so great that his neck snapped in two. The motorcycle crashed, dragging the dying cop. Lee looked around to see if anyone had observed anything. No other cops were in the vicinity and he decided to bolt from the scene.

He still had about eighteen months to go before he could get his undergraduate degree, but this experience had scarred him. He put his head down, finished at the top of his class, applied to the UCLA for a Master’s Program in Computer Science and quietly left the country. Never did he imagine that his past would catch up with him when he was at the pinnacle of his career. Someone, unfortunately, for him, had taken photos of the incident and decided to put it to good use.

One fine day during the summer, he received a call from an unknown person. “Dr. Lee. I have something important for you. Could we meet?”

Lee said, “Who is this?”

“That’s not important. What I have, is.”

“You are talking in riddles. I have no time for it.”

“Er… let me refresh your memory, doctor. Remember the incident with the motorcycle policeman twenty years ago?”

Lee was shell-shocked. With a sinking heart, he agreed to a meeting. The man who came to meet him gave him 24 hours to decide. Come voluntarily to help motherland China or get extradited and face the consequences of killing a cop. Lee came clean to his wife who comforted him, but she had to be in the US to take care of the children’s education. Lee had to go it alone.

He was up the whole night, trying to find a way out. He knew that he had the maximum leverage only while he was still on American soil. In the days that followed, Dr. Lee managed to strike a deal – he would work for three years and then return to the States.

“I will return to mainland China, provided…”

“I didn’t know you were in a position to bargain…”

“It is your call. The fact that you came to me indicates that you do not have anyone else qualified. If you want me to work for three years, there are some conditions…”

“Such as?”

“One, you will place a sum of 10 million dollars into escrow where it will be freed after a period of three years into the joint account that I and my wife own. I will give the details. I will need to see the signed documents before I leave town.

“Two, I will be free regardless of the failure or success of the project that you want me to work on.

“Three, you will not touch any of my family members. Once the three year-period completes, there will be no contact.”

“You have a lot of nerve, making such demands. I will have to get back to you.”

A few days later, a FedEx parcel arrived. Inside it were details from a reputed Escrow company, of a sum of Ten million dollars, which would be released after a three-year period. The money will be invested in US Government Bonds and the accruing interest will also be credited into the Bank account.

The abrupt departure of his for a year of sabbatical and leave without pay for two years, stunned his peers and the students. He was a popular teacher and was considered one of the pioneers in the field of cryptography. That he is taking time off to be with his aging parents was welcomed. Since it was still a few weeks to fall, when regular classes started, Lee could pull it off. He had doubts about his own future, but this way at least he would have provided for his family.

Lee knew that the US Presidency was decided in just a handful of states – it was one, Florida in 2000, and by 2020 the number had grown to 9. The states that decide the Presidency were Iowa, Ohio, Florida, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Georgia, Arizona, Michigan, and Wisconsin. Each had its own unique set of issues that demanded the attention at the Federal level and when that was lacking, they decided to punish the status quo.

A good reminder of the key states was provided in the Presidential election of 2016, when the Blue Wall of the Democrats had come crashing down after losing Michigan and Wisconsin. The first had 16 electoral votes while the second, 10. The Democrats had believed that they had both in their pocket, but the voters had other ideas. Weakening labor unions and a general disenchantment among White voters contributed to the upset.

In the crucial nine states, only 21 counties flipped from Red to Blue or vice-versa. There are just over 3,000 counties in the United States, but only a fraction has a significant impact on the Presidential election outcome. This explains why Scranton, only the sixth-largest city in the state of Pennsylvania, becomes critical, whereas Los Angeles, the second-largest city in the United States, loses out in electoral importance. In fact, the whole of California was largely ignored in a Presidential election as it was considered solidly Democratic.

Lee came up with detailed statistics on these 21 counties, their demographical change, the voting pattern etc., and devised a plan. First, see if these counties are purchasing new Electronic Voting Machines; if not, subtly make the purchase happen. A few State politicians could be persuaded through inducements on the absolute need to getting the state-of-the-art Electronic Voting Machines. Once this was accomplished, bid for these tenders with the lowest price — even at a loss. The goal was to have the Digitalis Electronic Voting Machine installed in these premises.

In order to establish credibility in the machines, a couple of elections would be made to go correctly. At the opportune moment, for instance, a Presidential vote with much at stake, the weightage factor could be figured out so as to favor one candidate over the other. For best accuracy, the programming of the weights needed to be done just after the votes were cast and before the counting began – a narrow window. Realizing that this was fraught with risks, Lee came up with a more realistic method: Go by the poll forecasts and set the weighting constants ahead of time on the Electronic Voting Machines.

But how to access the Electronic Voting Machines? Each and every one had to be changed, which was impossible. The more he thought, the more he was stuck by the enormity of the project he had taken on – the process had to be transparent and appear to be fair and yet must produce the desired results.

Could the all-important 21 counties that fall in the nine states be further pruned down to a handful? Was it possible to exploit some other rules, to get the desired outcome?

A lightbulb went off when Dr. Lee read about how some states did not require proper forms of identification in order to vote. He knew that the US did not have a voter card and relied on each state to announce its own results and this presented an opportunity. After some thought and research, he came up with the following table:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **State** | **Automatic recount trigger** | **Photo ID required (Yes/ No)** |
| Arizona | 0.1% | No |
| Ohio | Yes | No |
| Florida | Less than 0.5% | No, can provisionally vote |
| Pennsylvania | Less than 0.5% | No |
| Georgia | No | Yes |
| Michigan | Less than 2000 votes | Yes |
| Wisconsin | No | Yes |
| Iowa | Yes | Yes |
| North Carolina | Less than 10000 votes | No |

Of the nine, five did not require a form of identification. This means that in these states, anyone guaranteed to not vote (dead people, people living abroad, people residing out-of-state) presented a potential vote.

The five states chosen were AZ, FL, NC, OH and PA. The remaining four were Plan B.

Lee carefully chose the counties for the Plan A states – Maricopa County in AZ, Erie County & Philadelphia suburbs in PA, Miami Dade and Orange County in FL, Mecklenburg, and Wake counties in NC. After some thought, he added Clark County, Nevada. Eight counties to work with for Plan A.

From the Plan B states, Lee picked only two – Georgia and Michigan. These presented some unique opportunities. Both offered a huge bounty of electoral delegates. But he needed to think it through as to how he would “manage” these states.

Lee went to work. It took him six months and a few primaries to test all the combinations and permutations. There was a Hail Mary option too, which could be used if the assumptions went haywire. That it would have to be pressed into service, was something no one had anticipated.

# 26

Chinese Premier’s residence, Beijing

T

he Chinese Premier started off the meeting with, “What do you have for me?”

Lee cleared his throat and said, “It is very difficult to fix elections in an advanced country like the US. Even if we pull it off, systematic investigations conducted by their agencies will bring out the truth and we will be exposed.”

“I see. Did you know if the 2016 elections were rigged?”

“I heard some rumors, but they could not be confirmed.”

“What does that tell you?”

“I don’t know. That it is difficult to prove?”

“Precisely! If the candidate you back wins, then it is possible to make the issue go away. News has a lifecycle of 24 hours or less, and before you know, another crisis erupts, and public attention turns to that.”

“So, the candidate we back must win, and then all is well?”

The Premier smiled. He was planning to eliminate Dr. Lee after the elections, but maybe the man had his uses, he thought.

Lee believed that it was possible and easier to identify dead people, untraceable people, and other hard-to-locate people to vote in the US Presidential election in certain states. For instance, it could be arranged in Arizona and Nevada, into which a number of illegal immigrants arrived. According to the findings of a reputed research agency, the immigration percentage to the total population in Arizona was 3.9 percent, while unauthorized immigration to the total population of immigrants was at 28 per cent. That works out to one in four. It was 7.1 percent and 35 percent (one in three) respectively in Nevada. States such as Alabama and Arkansas too had a high proportion of unauthorized immigrants as a total of all immigrants there — 34 percent and 41 percent, respectively.

The challenge, however, was to manipulate without the living knowing and creating a ruckus. There was also the question of managing the officials manning the polling stations.

It was late summer, and the next US Presidential election was still years away. With careful planning, a lot could be done in the remaining time. The incumbent President was breathing fire at China and imposing stringent tariffs, which was making Beijing non-competitive in the international market.

The US President had said, while declaring a trade war with China, “My administration squarely accuses China of unfair trade practices and the theft of intellectual property rights.” China had retorted that the US was seeking to curb China’s growing economic might on the global stage.

The American President had recently announced a new tariff policy that aimed to encourage consumers to buy American products. This was done by imposing heavy duties on imported, especially Chinese products, and making them more expensive. It had slapped tariffs on more than $350 billion worth of Chinese goods, in four tranches.

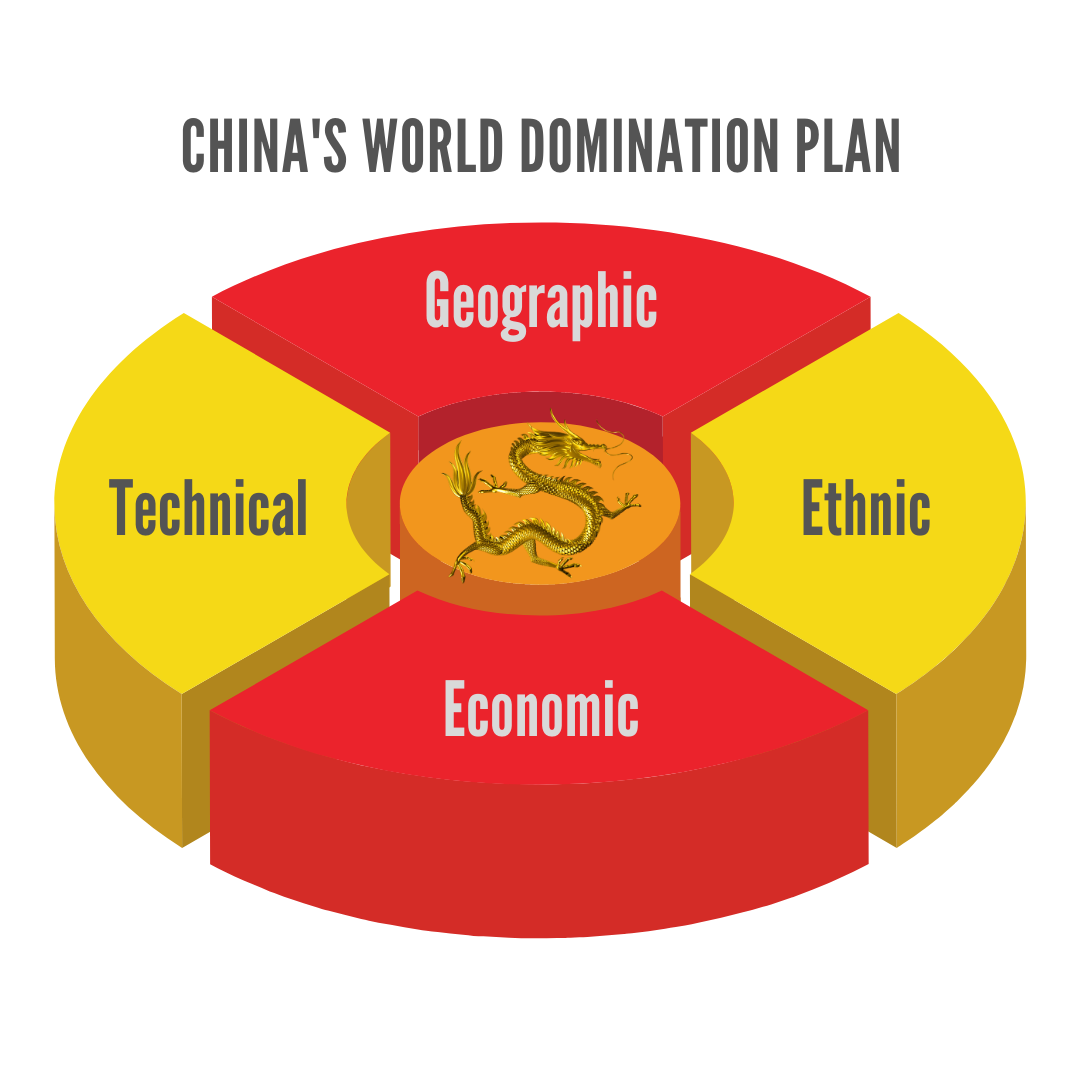
China had in turn done the same by way of retaliation but the damage to the US markets was relatively low. This was largely because US imported three times more from China than China did from the US.

# 27

19 months to the election

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he Chinese Premier was looking at the drawing that was adorning his wall, behind the Picasso painting as it noiselessly slid out to reveal his game plan for world domination.

Every time he thought the Chinese were making progress, the US President had somehow managed to throw a monkey wrench into those plans and it was back to square one...

He compartmentalized the plan and shared information on a need-only basis, to his inner circle of doers, about half a dozen. Each had a slice of the pie to work on and headed the team. It was intense work, with so many moving parts but this was Premier’s legacy to the great Kingdom of China. Every time a member of the Team of Six came to give him an update, he would quiz them incessantly, look for any loopholes in the process, anything that might slip through the cracks.

The Governor of Xinjiang was the person trusted with ensuring that the entire state of Xinjiang would be ethnic Chinese in the next two decades. In order to ensure this, the state went about systematically separating a man from his wife, often killing one or both, sometimes just the man for his organs and a man of pure Chinese blood would rape the wife, so the child would be half-Chinese. A similar pogrom was being put in place in Tibet.

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Another vexatious problem facing the Premier was the outright rejection of the 5G technology by the West, primarily led by the President of the United States. His constant railing and showing examples of how intrusive and pervasive the China-version of 5G had become disgusted him for the accuracy with which they portrayed the way China had implemented it. This despite a five-year lead over the nearest 5G solution provider, based in Southern California.

The upshot of this was that all the investment of putting together far-reaching enhancements were limited to within China and a few nations.

11 months to the election

As the Chinese Premier took stock of the four initiatives he had championed for Global domination, only Ethnic Cleansing had met with success thus far.

On the Economic front, the US President was relentless, hammering away at China for its trade practices and not allowing any bargaining room to maneuver. As things stood, a lot of industries, which had sold its products below the manufacturing price to capture the market were bleeding money. As standards of living rose, more and more Chinese were entering the middle class and consuming goods which were obscenely luxurious, with hardly a thought for the future.

In order to ensure the semblance of prosperity, the Premier had ordered printing Chinese money as a multiple of China’s GDP to give the semblance of prosperity. Many un-manned townships with huge skyscrapers were being built just to keep the home building sector occupied.

As his trade negotiator was trying in vain to persuade the US to lower tariffs, his thoughts were interrupted by his secretary gently nudging him. It was an urgent call from the US.

“Tell me you have some good news,” growled the Chinese Premier.

“We are trying our best to draw the line, but the President is not relenting an inch. They keep producing new evidence of our tactics of obfuscation, skullduggery and stealing of intellectual property. Our tactic of stopping purchase of food grains has angered them even more. The President is acting like a man with a mission, who wants to set right a lot of things before he steps down.”

“Hmmm. So where do things stand now?”

“They have given us a list of items amounting to close to $300 billion on which they want to levy a 25 percent tariff. This will completely render our industries ineffective, as we are already operating on razor thin margins.”

“I know that,” snapped the Premier. He was down to his last bullets and the other side was still breathing fire.

“Tell them that we will lift the sanctions on food grains and will boost our imports by another 200 billion. Sound them out off-the record and see if they will reduce the tariffs from 25 percent to 10 percent. After all, the President is under pressure from this party to help them retain the White House. If it looks positive, I will have the team here send you a new draft.”

“Will do,” the trade negotiator said, before hanging up.

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The Premier had been receiving updates on the new virus that had seemed to have hit Hunan city and was spreading throughout the prefecture. He wanted to know why this was not being controlled. The next call went out to the Chief Virologist.

“How are you, Dr. Shu?”

“I am fine, sir. To what do I owe the honor of this call?”

Premier laughed and came straight to the point. “What is happening with the new virus outbreak? Why is it not being controlled?”

Dr. Shu hesitated for a few moments before replying. “We are not exactly sure where it originated. Our scientists are trying to recreate the genetic sequence of the virus it so they can find an antidote, but it is proving to be difficult. It could have been an uncontrolled lab experiment and we can’t tell how it will mutate.”

“But this is not the first virus, and this won’t be the last, right?”

“Right.”

“And in time, each virus will die a natural death, isn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm. I am hearing also that it is extremely infectious. Is it true?”

“Yes.”

“How soon can you find the antidote?”

“We are working 24x7. I will let you know as soon as we have a solution.”

“OK, keep me posted. Let me know as soon as you find it.”

As he paced back and forth, a plan began to form in his mind. “If it is difficult for my scientists, it will be difficult for others too. Maybe they will find an antidote in six months but during those months, I will have a free run. I should be able to set in motion all the plans I have to make China the world leader, the country that every other country would fear,” the megalomaniac in him took over. The fact that the virus was able to mutate into new forms brought a smile to his lips. “This ought to be fun,” he told himself.

Just before retiring for the night, he asked his secretary to include an escape clause in the latest trade agreement with the US. “It should be benign and at the same time effective,” he told her. Something along the lines, “if there is a naturally occurring disaster, then both parties will renegotiate.”

The clause was inserted at the very last minute into the Phase One trade agreement and was explained away as something similar to an “act of God,” something that the US negotiators were familiar with.

By the beginning of the year, the ‘Phase One’ deal was signed, whereby China agreed to boost US imports by $200 billion and strengthen intellectual property rules. In exchange, the US said it would reduce the tariffs by half. The “escape” clause had made it into the agreement.

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A few weeks later, as if on cue, a mutating virus erupted out of China, and started spreading across the globe at an alarming pace and reduced the world’s strongest economies, not to speak of lesser robust ones, to rubble. In the initial and most critical stages, China did little to prevent the outbreak. It allowed international flights to land and take off, though it imposed curbs on domestic flights to contain the spread the of the virus from within. It sweet-talked even the World Health Organization (WHO), because of which the world health body gave a clean chit to Beijing and even praised it for its “efforts” in tackling the pandemic.

United States was furious. The President went on record to say that China had deliberately allowed the spread of the virus and would now exploit the clause in the tariffs deal to its advantage. He promised further retaliatory action. “This little virus that caused such damage globally came from China. It’s Made in China,” he thundered.

But the damage had been done. The US’s GDP fell at close to 33 percent annualized rate — the deepest decline since 1947. By the end of six months of the pandemic, more than 30 million Americans were receiving unemployment checks. The economy suffered its biggest blow since the Great Depression in the second quarter, as the pandemic destroyed consumer and business spending.

In the midst of all this, Team Two of Operation Dragon, the one tasked with fixing the US elections decided that the time had come to call in the favors that had been bestowed upon low and mid-level officials in the various states/ counties, etc. in the US over the years. When the list was revealed to Dr. Lee, he smiled. He could now devise a grand plan – something that could be executed flawlessly from sitting halfway across the world. The planning could not involve too many people, given the sensitive nature of the plot; at most, three or four. And one of them would have to be the initiator. Angel Face. She had to return to the United States but in a way as to not arouse the suspicion of the Feds. The process would be that of a clandestine insertion - set up the deals - and then a quiet extraction. Using Chinese subs that can hide their presence.

The pandemic had forced the US’s hand – it had to relax the restrictions for voting by allowing mail-in votes, something that gave an opportunity to fudge the result. Say some counties are supplied with identical looking ballot papers like the Government supplied ones but would cause a lot of errors when they are scanned by the Electronic Voting Machines, forcing a manual check and adjudication. The ballot papers would show as if more than one candidate were selected by the voter, thus requiring the election agent to make the “right” choice.

# 28

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he Premier had not planned for the virus to be so widespread that it would result in a global pushback. It was so bad that the source of the virus had to be sealed off completely from the rest of the country. The severity of the outbreak was kept out of the news. Many foreigners in the city of Hunan, who were allowed to fly back to their homeland, ended up being carriers of the new disease.

South American nations such as Brazil (more than 255,000 deaths), Colombia (over 59,000 deaths), Argentina (52,000 plus deaths) and Mexico (more than 186,000 deaths) staggered at the enormity of the impact. Europe fared no better. The UK recorded over 122,000 deaths; France 86,000 plus; Spain nearly 70,000 deaths; Italy had over 97,000 deaths; more than 70,000 died in Germany; and Russia recorded close to 90,000 deaths.

Asian countries suffered too. India had over 157,000 deaths. India, Iran, Indonesia, Turkey, Iraq, and Pakistan totaled more than 300,000 deaths, with India alone accounting for nearly half of them.

The outbreak was expected to last three months, but it took forever. In Hunan, the incinerators could not keep up with the number of deaths that were happening in the city. And still the city was in the lockdown mode, with no news going in or out.

China lurched from one crisis to another on a daily basis as the Premier and his two deputies were putting out the fires; it was turning out to be a hopeless situation. For public consumption, the three top leaders were working in tandem but in reality, they were using the pandemic to undercut one another’s efforts in order to tarnish their public image on the issue.

News of Bang sabotaging Lin’s orders and vice-versa would reach the Premier’s ears, but he did nothing to quell them. He wanted to keep the pot boiling between the two while ensuring that no outrage got out of hand. The virus had hit the Chinese economy too, and various short-term suggestions were floated to fix the problem. Lin recommended that the country currency Yen be devalued, but Bang vehemently objected on the ground that the decision would dilute the valuation of large Chinese firms based in Shanghai and near-about.

What began as a behind-the-door squabble soon broke out in the open. Both Lin and Bang began to present their views on the contentious subject to media persons but telling their sources to not directly quote them.

Lin told the Press, “Our currency needs to be reset to a more realistic value. Devaluation will help exporters and bring more money into our economy.”

On the other hand, Bang, refusing to be quoted, of course, stated, “Devaluation would be an indication of weakness. It would bring down the value of firms operating out of Hong Kong and elsewhere. The damage to our economy as a result could be considerable.”

The stock markets in Hong Kong and Shanghai took a hit as the fight intensified in the open. Billions of dollars of wealth stood wiped out in a matter of days.

The Premier knew that the mess was the creation of his deputies. Since this was not the right time to pull them up — he would have time later to teach them a lesson — he called them for a meeting and after a great deal of gentle persuasion (something he was not used to), the Premier managed to work out a compromise: There would be devaluation but not to the extent that Lin had wanted, and only to a level that Bang was comfortable with.

He remarked, “This is not the time for us to bicker in the open. The solution I have suggested is the best. Neither of you will lose face. And we send the right signal.”

The Premier’s task was made somewhat easy by the fact that not just he, but also Lin and Bang, through proxies, owned hundreds of shares in stock-listed blue-chip companies. If the stock markets continued to collapse, he reminded them, they all stood to lose massively. The loss of wealth would not just be a personal setback; it could adversely impact their political careers since nothing moved without money.

While all this was going on, the Premier was setting his pieces on three different fronts – South China Sea (SCS), India, and Hong Kong (HK). His view was to have Bang deal with the SCS and Lin with HK. He would personally direct the operations against the US and India, the two most important powers on Earth. This was his ploy to keep his deputies busy and tied down to local issues.

The Premier was worried by the winds of democracy blowing from Hong Kong and believed that the crackdown he ordered would contain the situation. But that was not happening. He then directed that the draconian National Security Act — that virtually takes away the region’s autonomy — be implemented forcefully in the region. Media and Internet censorship was imposed, and digital means were employed to identify and isolate ‘troublesome’ elements.

The law was extended after the Premier goaded the National People’s Congress Standing Committee, the legislative branch of the ruling party in China, to unanimously pass the Act. The law was drafted in secrecy and enacted hours before the 23rd anniversary of the former colony’s handover to China from Great Britain.

Even Hong Kong’s Chief Executive, Zhai Chunhua, was kept in the dark until the law had taken effect. Serious cases pertaining to offenses under the law carry a prison sentence of at least 10 years, and for the most serious offenses, prison for life.

Zhai took exception to the move. She spoke to the Premier over the phone and said, “Sir, I feel humiliated that I was not taken into confidence.”

The Premier did not trust her, which is why he had kept the decision a secret. But he hid it and said sweetly, “My apologies. I have faith in you but not in some of the people close to you. I was worried that the matter would be leaked, and then you would have had a big problem on your hands. Which is why I did not inform you beforehand.”

It was an unconvincing explanation, and both knew it. As protests grew and the local administration was at its wit’s end on how to tackle it, came news that Zhai had been replaced. She swallowed the insult but remained silent. Had she spoken out against the decision, she knew, she could have been even arrested on trumped charges of acting against national interests.

So, the only communication to the media from her end was the following one-liner: “I respect the government’s decision. I shall remain a loyal party worker.”

Once the law came into force, officers from the local Hong Kong Police Force along with China’s own security agency, the People’s Armed Police Force, went berserk, committing atrocities on the civilian population.

Meanwhile, China had been speeding up its Incremental Encroachment Strategy in the South China Sea, not to mention at the Line of Actual Control that acts as its borders with India. The Premier told his senior party colleagues, “China will continue to pursue its interests with all the might at its disposal. There are forces that want us to buckle down, but we shall not.” The belligerence strengthened his position in the party and neutralized his opponents.

# 29

“Why do they have so many holes in their election procedures?”

Dr. Lee paused, sipped some water, and replied, “America runs on the basis of trust. In most places, the spoken word is as good as a written. Right from their childhood, everyone is taught what is right and what is wrong. Their belief in their systems and processes is absolute and they expect everyone to be just like them, that is walk down the path of the truth. What we are about to do is to exploit that trust and shake the very foundation of the country… One man’s trust is another’s man’s opportunity.” He looked immensely pleased at his twist of phrase.

A smile spread slowly on the Chinese Premier’s lips. “This is getting better and better,” he thought.

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New Year’s Day – 307 days to election

T

he personal physician of the President wanted an urgent word. He had some sobering news for the POTUS. As he was waiting for the President, he was trying to form the sentences in his mind.

“What do you have for me, Doc?” the President demanded, almost jovially. The physician was also a personal friend of many years.

“It is your latest medical report, Mr. President,” said the doctor.

“And what of it?”

“I am afraid there is some bad news sir.”

“Such as…?”

“The cancer seems to be moving aggressively. It has now spread from your pancreas to your stomach.”

“I feel fine. In fact, my appetite has never been better,” the President retorted.

“If I could perhaps explain it in some detail…” The doctor was trying to communicate the severity of the ailment the President was suffering from.

“I am fine. Let us talk tomorrow. Whatever it is, I am sure you can take care of it…” The President stood up and started walking out of the Oval Room.

The physician shook his head as he stopped by the Office of the Secretary to the President and requested a 30-minute meeting the following day, at 9 AM. He wanted the First Lady (FLOTUS) to also be present in that meeting. The somber way he delivered it, made the Secretary raise an eyebrow. She was used to a lot of action/ hyperbole, being so close to the most powerful man on Earth, but this seemed ominous.

Without waiting for a confirmation, the doctor left the building. “Tomorrow is going to be a difficult day,” he muttered to himself.

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Even though he had brushed the doctor off, the President knew that his body was telling him to slow down. The cheer that he generated externally was certainly not in keeping with what he was feeling inside. His digestion had gone for a toss because of the pancreas not releasing enough enzymes. Also, since not enough hormones were being produced that help manage body sugar levels, he had become a diabetic too.

He had been told by the doctor earlier that the cancer had begun in the cells that line the ducts carrying digestive enzymes out of the pancreas. Pancreatic cancer was not detected at its early stages in President, which is not surprising since the detection is normally missed until it goes out of control.

He had begun to display most of the signs of pancreatic cancer: Abdominal pain that reaches the back; loss of appetite and weight; itchy skin, etc.

As the President lay in bed, sleep would not come. He had become an Accidental President, a rank outsider to the circus that Washington DC had become. His claim that he was here to “drain the swamp” had resonated with the voters that led to a surprise victory four years ago. While he had acted swiftly on some things, there was still a lot of work to be done. And he was sure that his deputy was not the person cut out for it.

The following morning, the President’s personal physician delivered the bad news in the First Lady’s presence. The cancer was spreading aggressively, and the President had at the most, twelve months. He was in no shape to do aggressive campaigning and should be putting his papers in order. FLOTUS was shocked beyond words.

Using X-rays, the doctor traced how a minuscule cell six months ago had grown exponentially. It was a gut-wrenching moment to see someone who appeared healthy to be told that your clock is running out.

The First Lady had not known about the cancer, let alone its recent spread. With tears in her eyes, she clutched her husband’s arms and muttered, “Oh god! Oh god!” The President himself was in no state to comfort her, but he tried to put up a brave front.

“Now, now!” he caressed her hair. “Don’t you get worried by this doctor. He seldom has good news. I will prove him wrong!”

She looked fiercely at the doctor and hissed, “Isn’t there anything your goddamned cutting edge medical science can do?”

The physician sighed. “Ma’am. The President has been getting the best medical care available in the world. But the cancer has gone out of control. We have been trying everything. Radiation, chemotherapy… Nothing has worked. Besides, these treatments have taken a toll on your husband. They have side effects. Chemo is directed at the cancer cells, but it also destroys normal cells, especially in the bone marrow, mouth, digestive tract.”

The President intervened, “Enough of it, doctor. You are scaring my wife.” He looked at her tenderly and said, “I’ll be okay, honey. Don’t you worry.”

An hour after he came, the doctor left. The President escorted the First Lady, still sobbing, to the residence and then walked back to the Oval Office. He phoned one of his best friends on the West Coast, with whom he had discussed politics on and off for the past two decades. “See me immediately,” he said.

The friend was Bill Adams. Already one of the five richest men on earth, he had achieved stunning success in providing a platform for the world to sell its products. His company was a Wall Street darling, and its torrid growth had ensured that whatever Adams touched, turned into gold.

The Modern-Day Midas, as Adams was called in the industry, had everything he could ask for – his recent divorce notwithstanding. In his mid-forties, he was contemplating retiring from running the company and spending time on his hobbies. The call from President, urging him to take the next flight out to see the President in DC told him that something important was up. And he had a punishing schedule all day long and was loath to spend the evening outside his home. But he could not say ‘No’ to the President.

It was pushing 8 PM by the time Adams shook hands with the President. Both had eaten and Adams was struck by the fact that the President was drinking mineral water. At this time of the day, he usually would be having a glass of wine at least. Something was not right.

The President started the ball rolling, after exchanging pleasantries.

“So, Bill, have you completely recovered from the Hack attack on your servers?”

“How did you know?”

“I am the President of the US, Bill! I know these things… I also know that you are not the only one to suffer the indignity of having data from your servers being copied and sent out to China.”

Adams was not sure whether to be happy or sad – that even his competitors had been hacked meant that the hacking was widespread.

He said, “We have identified the rogue server blades and removed them. We have also fortified our security. It won’t happen again!” Even though he sounded confident, he knew that there could be other ways his systems were being hacked.

“Do you want to do something about it?” The President wondered.

“Yeah, I would! The next time I see that rat…” Adams went on an expletive-filled rant at the Premier of China and his cyber security team.

The President let him finish. He had riled him up. Adams was ready to take the leap.

The President said matter-of-factly, “My doctor tells me that I do not have much time left. I have decided to not run for re-election. And my Veep is not cut out to take China head on. If you accept, I will propose your name to the GOP as the Presidential candidate…”

Adams was stunned. He composed himself, stood up and sat beside him and held his hand. A few minutes that seemed a few hours elapsed as he internalized what he had just heard. He then slowly rose and went back to his sofa.

“Why me?”

“This great country of ours is going to hell in a hand basket. Everywhere I turn, I see venal, weak people compromised in one way or the other. You have enough money to not want anything from being the President. But think about your kids, grandkids, and great grandkids. They deserve all the breaks that we got growing up, don’t they?”

He continued, “You are sufficiently removed from the political muck pond that DC has become. And if I endorse you, the party will accept it enthusiastically. The shock of my not running and finding a suitable replacement will only mean that you will be off to a flying start.”

Adams said softly, “Mr. President, this is no time to discuss such matters. Your health is the only issue. I can only wish you speedy recovery.”

“Thank you, Bill. But this is the best time to take a call. Say, ‘yes’ to my offer please, for this country’s sake.”

Adams nodded his head slowly.

The President called a press conference the following Monday morning at 11 AM EST, 8 AM PST, a time when the nation was up and about. What he was going to announce would stun the world.

With Adams by his side, he said tersely, “Friends, owing to certain medical complications, I shall not be running for re-election. In other words, I am no longer a candidate for a second term. I shall propose to my party the name of Bill Adams, who is here with me, and whom you all know to be an honest and dedicated public figure, as the new candidate. I hope that my party will endorse his candidacy and every single member of the party will ensure his victory. Thank you. No questions please!”

If the nation was stunned, to say that the Vice President was appalled would not be an exaggeration. He had not seen the blow coming and so there was nothing he could have done to soften or deflect it. He called in his close associates and discussed the matter. Some suggested that he stand firm and throw his hat in the ring. But he knew that that would be futile. The President, after his announcement, had public sympathy on his side and his nominee would sail through in the party.

He remarked, “This is not the time to dissent. I may show courage today, but it will lead us nowhere. Instead, we will be sidelined in the party — and, if Adams wins, in the new Administration as well.” It was decided that he would heartily back Adam’s candidature.

The Republican Party met and endorsed Adam’s candidacy, with the Vice President taking the lead.

# 30

July 1 - 125 days to Election Day

T

he virus kept rearing its ugly head every time the country opened up. After two false starts, it was decided that the elections would be held with a strong recommendation that as much as possible, the voters should vote early or mail in their ballots. An unprecedented number of ballots were being printed and mailed. Many states were giving a three-month window in which to mail in their ballots.

The caution appeared justified. In the first place, the federal government had been less than enthusiastic in enforcing lockdowns and social distancing norms, as well as making the wearing of masks in public places compulsory. This provided the virus the right ecosystem to flourish. Belatedly the government clamped down, but only for a few months.

Seeing the relaxations, the people too abandoned caution under various excuses and began their outdoor activities with full zeal. They crowded the beaches, golf courses and parks on the pretext that the warm temperatures had made them come out. Some said that their children needed to be ‘freed’. A few governors, like that of New York City, did make passionate appeals to the public to maintain safety standards, but their voice went unheeded. The city of Oklahoma actually abandoned the requirement of masks! All this meant that the virus spread even faster, resulting in a massive death toll.

Sept 15 - 49 days to Election Day

It was decided that there would be three presidential debates and one vice-presidential debate, sandwiched between the second and the third, final presidential debate.

The first debate had Adams and Gallagher circling the ring, looking for an opening – the thrusts and parries were mostly to try and see the chinks for exploiting in the second and third debates.

Both held their ground as they expanded on their vision for America. Immigration, legal and illegal was discussed at length. When asked about the wall, Adams said, “I intend to continue the good work the President has done thus far. Illegal immigration is a real problem. Not only does it create law and order situations, but it also results in stress of resources over which the American people have the first right.”

Gallagher responded, “The wall is everything that goes against the values of free movement and inclusivity that the United States of America stands for. I am aware of illegal immigration but creating a wall after we played a role in bringing down another wall — the Berlin Wall — is unacceptable. There can be other means to check the problem that exists. I stand for a comprehensive overhaul of President’s policy.”

But it was on the minimum wage-per-hour issue that Adams surprisingly stole a march over Gallagher. He said, “I have already implemented it in my companies.” But he had soothing words for the others – each one needs to evaluate how to improve their work efficiencies so that they can also pay the magic $15 per hour wages. This was a covert balancing act so as not to antagonize industry.

Gallagher had his moments when he talked about how the rich-poor divide had increased under the current President and that Adams would accelerate this. “You belong to the privileged class and will protect its interests,” he said scathingly.

Adams was quick to rebut. “Perhaps my opponent does not know, or refuses to acknowledge, that I was not exactly born with a silver spoon in my mouth. I made my way up the ladder through sheer hard work. I understand the issues that the poor face and I also understand the concerns of the rich.”

The first debate was a draw.

It became evident to both the candidates that they had to continue to play to their respective strengths and not allow the other to seize upon their weaknesses. Adams, being a sudden arrival on the scene, had a slight advantage since the Gallagher camp had not prepared enough to counter him. On the other hand, Gallagher had a reputation that was hard to beat. He was seen as a game changer, a man driven by sincerity and strength of purpose. But he had to quickly course-correct to effectively counter Adams in the next two debates.

# 31

Sept 19 - 45 days to Election Day

S

usan Sanders was back at her desk in Hong Kong and watching in real time the happenings at the safe house that Mia Wang was staying in. Something did not seem right as she played back videos from the front of the house and a window located in the rear.

She saw Mia appear in both places within seconds of each other. The two cameras were at least 100 feet apart and there was no way Mia would have covered that distance so quickly. The cameras could not have lied. Were they deceived?

The more she rocked the video camera footage back and forth, the more she was concerned. There was just no way that a person could be in two places in such a short time, unless…

Then something dramatic happened. Mia “Angel Face” Wang came to the front door with a suitcase in hand, got into a waiting car and sped off. Within moments, a second car pulled up and, again, Mia Wang got into that one too. A third, a fourth, a fifth and a sixth car followed soon after, in clockwork precision. Watching the videos, Susan was losing her mind! How could there be six Mias? When did they get to the house? Where were they headed to?

Susan scrambled all her resources to follow the six departing cars, all carrying Mia “Angel Face” Wang, but she could only succeed in tailing the first three. The real Mia Wang was in the sixth car as it quietly merged into rush hour traffic of Beijing. Clearly, China’s MSS had outsmarted the CIA by creating one clone too many. Perhaps it was simply taking necessary precautions, or maybe the secret service had an inkling that Angel Face was being watched. Sanders wrung her hands in despair.

The sea coast was a mere 200 miles from Beijing, a distance the car covered in three hours flat. It had become dark by then and started raining. Using a camouflage material-based umbrella that was opaque to satellite imaging, Mia jumped into a speed boat, which took her straight to a waiting submarine. Of course, she had no idea that she would be boarding a submarine, of all things.

The nuclear-powered submarine set sail for Oregon coast, a mere 3500 miles away. The distance would be covered in approximately 19 days, for a landing on a desolate section of beach near Portland, on October 8. Victor Valdez was slated to arrive in Portland for a public meeting, and a fund raiser had been planned on the 10th. Mary was not accompanying him. The twain would meet again, except that now Angel Face carried a brief for the Premier. She would promise lust and much more if the VP candidate would do a few things the ‘right’ way. She had a rendezvous to keep.

The fund-raising event is a critical part of the electoral campaign where competing Presidential candidates and Vice-Presidential candidates woo voters and moneybags to part with their money against the promise of creating a ‘Great America’. The accounting of such money is maintained by the Federal Election Commission. It is common wisdom that candidates who have a head-start in raising funds have the advantage, since they have more money and more time to put that money to good use.

But of course, collection of funds through such events is only one means. Each party has its own panel to help elect a President, which works alongside the official campaign. The money collected through the committee adds to the war chest of the candidate’s individual collection through fund-raising campaigns.

This is not all. Super Political Action committees (PACs), also can raise and spend unlimited amounts, thus helping or hurting the fortunes of a Presidential nominee. Tens of millions of dollars are, thus, collected through all these joint methods.

The stage was set for Valdez. A rich, Chinese American multi-millionaire was going to be present at the October 10 fundraiser and Mia “Angel Face” Wang would be in attendance as his guest. The whole thing had been carefully orchestrated. The organizers were informed that the niece of the businessman, who was supposed to be at the fund-raiser, would not be able to make it due to certain pandemic-related complications. Instead, the millionaire’s team, suggested, the niece’s friend would like to join in. They were only too happy to oblige.

The fundraiser was the last event of the day for Valdez. An impressive crowd had gathered at the venue, and Portland being a democratic stronghold, Valdez was on a strong wicket. The people burst into loud claps and cheers as Valdez was introduced. He smiled — that same dazzling one which had floored many across the country, cleared his throat and said:

“Friends! I stand before you to seek your support as a Vice Presidential candidate. But only a few years ago, I would have considered myself lucky to be even invited to such events. My mother came to this great country with nothing. I was orphaned at birth. But thanks to the goodness of some people, including those here, I could study and stand on my feet.

“I worked hard and did not know if all that work would change my fortunes, but I was lucky that I grew up in this country, where even the children of immigrants had equal rights to education, to progress, to prosperity.

“Today, I am in a position that I had not even dreamt of. Vast numbers of people out there, and here too, want to see me as their Vice President. What an honor!”

The crowd was hanging on to his every word. Angel Face Wang, who was in the back rows, watched the happenings with a look of detached interest. Valdez continued,

“Friends, I will not make tall promises to you. All I can say is that I will work in your interest, with full dedication, sincerity, and honesty. Thank you, and God bless America!”

There was sustained applause for five minutes, during which the Valdez stood waving to the crowd, with a big smile on his face. As people lined up to take pictures, Wang hung back to be among the last ones to meet Valdez. It was pushing 11 PM and most photographers had left the scene. Valdez was looking at his watch when Wang sidled up to him and whispered, “Hi, handsome! Long time no see!”

Victor could not believe his eyes, Mia “Angel Face” Wang, and here! She looked even more beautiful than before. His mouth went dry, and he could feel an instant erection as his brain played back the previous trysts. There was no way he could take her to his bedroom – too much security and too many eyes.

So, he did the next best thing – took her to the antechamber to the side of the stage where the guests could relax. His Chief of Staff got the hint and cleared the room quickly. The two repaired to the antechamber. As soon as they got in, Victor locked the door and embraced her tightly. Clothes started flying out in every direction. The sex was steamy, passionate, and primitive as the pent-up testosterone of the whole week, matching wits, saying the right things, not slipping up in media briefings took over.

It was all over in 10 minutes. It was only then that Valdez began to wonder as to how Mia had slipped into the US. He had read about her tryst with Jones, but who cares! She was too good a dish to pass up. However, as sanity crept back, he was concerned. Had he committed a faux pas? Was her presence just a coincidence or some kind of a plot?

He asked, “Where were you all these days? Hiding in Oregon?”

Angel Face did not answer and merely smiled. “Let him think that this is where I was,” she said to herself.

Then Valdez’s phone rang. It was Mary Hart-Valdez. Victor composed himself instantly, putting his index finger on Mia’s lips, and answered the phone. Mary had watched his speech, even though it was late in the night on the East Coast and complimented him on striking the right tone and tenor. He finished up quickly and turned back to look at Mia.

“When do I see you again?” he asked.

“Everything is explained in this,” Mia whispered in his ear as she gave him a thumb drive, even as there was a discreet knock on the door.

“Wait ten minutes and then come out. By that time, the floor will be clear,” Valdez said, as he left quietly.

Valdez made his way to the suite and eagerly plugged the pen drive to his laptop, already anticipating the date and time for his next exciting meeting with Mia. He was in for a shock.

What he saw on the screen was a detailed catalogue of videos of his trysts with Mia Wang, that too in breathtaking light and resolution. His mind raced and the heart pounded. How had she got those images in such good resolution?

Each video captured the date and time and some could-not-be-replicated features of his Senate office and the antechamber. As he watched, he was riveted. This was just the trailer video that auto-played as soon as he plugged it in.

At the end of it, he saw instructions with specific codes to be used in a ‘Help Wanted’ ad that would be run in the Washington Post. There was a ready reckoner on what each code meant – meet where, when or do what. It was blackmail, and clear as daylight.

Valdez collapsed on the bed. The ramifications of what he had done began to sink in.

# 32

At about five passengers per trip, close to 2,000 trips were made over a ten-day period to register all the fake votes. The final margin of victory was less than 3000. Team Gallagher would be grateful to the dead.

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Sept 20 - 44 days to Election Day

T

he Chinese Premier was in two minds. He had been notified that Valdez has been given the relevant material and should now be malleable and ductile. He smiled to himself as he recollected his engineering days, studying about the Strength of Materials.

But he was in two minds on whether Angel Face was now dispensable or should he wait for a while before taking a call. His ‘sent-down’ time in remote villages of China as a youth, doing the hard yards in the fields, had taught him to always remain grounded. As he climbed up the party’s ladder, he never forgot that learning. For a decision to have the desired impact, it was essential that the timing was right. A good decision implemented or announced at the wrong time could boomerang. There was virtue in patience, his mother always told him.

Thus, he had learned that every step, every maneuver must be looked at from every possible angle and determined if it was foolproof. Only and only when he was completely satisfied that every aspect had been explored and covered, should he take a decision.

As he played out what he hoped would be a win for the Gallagher-Valdez duo, he tried to visualize what would happen, say, six months into the new presidency. Would that be enough time for the new administration to get settled and perhaps roll back the tariffs? What if the new President does not play ball? What if, despite the compromised Valdez’s hints, Gallagher did not accede? The thought stopped him in his tracks. In such an eventuality, he realized, he would need Mia Wang to pressure Gallagher. That made his mind up – she would live to see another day.

Having decided, he quickly sent instructions to bring her back home via the same submarine. She would be housed somewhere else, far safer this time around, giving no chance for the CIA to snoop on her. He smiled at the audacious plan his Secret Service had hatched to smuggle her out of the country. After deliberating on various locations, he settled for an abandoned fishing village, named Houtouwan.

It is located in Zhejiang province’s Shengshan Island. Once a bustling community of over 2,000 people, Houtouwan became a ghost town in the early 1990s, after the residents left in search of better educational and employment opportunities. Since then, the village’s structures have remained uninhabited and the region pristine.

Although merely 40 miles from Shanghai, Houtouwan is not easily accessible; only the most determined adventurer gets to reach there. The journey to the village requires a combination of bus, boat, taxi, and boat again, taking roughly a total time of four hours. The Premier had a villa in the village, equipped with all the modern facilities, and a small army of guards and caretakers fiercely loyal to him, to look after the place. The water body made the place a good location to reach and live in relative anonymity.

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Bronkowski could not sleep. It was close to two weeks since he had been notified of the escape of Mia “Angel Face” Wang. Susan Sanders was going crazy, unable to figure out how Wang could have disappeared without a trace. As he read the brief that she had sent, his sixth sense kept telling him that perhaps she was headed for the US of A.

But why? One reason. If she was involved with one of the four candidates duking it out for the post of the leader of the Free World, perhaps there was a need for some arm-twisting. Assuming that to be true, he set about trying to figure out what he would do, if he were Wang’s handler.

Parking himself in front of the idiot box, he was channel surfing when he came across the electrifying speech of Victor Valdez in Portland, Oregon. “Wow, this guy is good,” Bronkowski muttered, as Valdez had the audience spellbound with his experiences of growing up in the US.

His thoughts alternated between Mia Wang and Valdez as he tried to shorten the list of persons who might be blackmail-material. He put the candidates in two bins, Below 50 and Above 50 years of age. The reasoning for that was that anyone above 50 would have had more opportunities to be compromised, having spent a fair amount of time in politics than the less-than-50 ones. And Adams had never been in politics, which meant that whatever be his dalliances with the members of the opposite sex, it was all as a technocrat, who believe that rules never applied to them.

He then put together four files on the four candidates, with material available in the public domain. One candidate had regular flings with a high society call girl, whom he met frequently at party circuits and in starred hotels. A second had problems with drugs; he had been inducted into a de-addiction camp while in college and had apparently kicked the habit by the time he became a public figure. And a third was heavily in debt and was in the clutches of private loan sharks who were squeezing him dry.

At various points in time, the media had spoken of these vulnerabilities, but because they were considered to be prying into an individual’s privacy, the sensational news died down after creating some initial ruckus. Besides, the people targeted were respected public figures, regarded well by the people as well.

Bronkowski discreetly contacted the members of the security detail of the four candidates and using politically correct language, figured out who had the most vulnerability, and ranked them accordingly.

Adams was at the top, with Valdez running a close second. The other two were well behind. When he added the security data with the publicly available data, Valdez pipped Adams. Valdez would be the one who might have some baggage that was blackmail material, Bronkowski concluded.

His focus now was on Valdez. After digging deeper, he found how Mary, his wife, had been trying to keep a check on him. Then he tracked the trips Valdez took when Mary was not in close proximity and her ‘eyes and ears’ on the campaign team too were not on the trip. There were eight of them. Of these eight, only two were to the West Coast and one of them was Portland, Oregon.

He had the material to start work on.

# 33

Oct 13 - 21 days to Election Day

T

he clock was pushing 7 PM when Bronkowski decided to call Susan Sanders. He had a theory that he wanted to run by her, just to get her feedback.

“Hello,” Sanders sounded sleepy as she took the call. It was 8 AM HK time and she had hit the sack only at 4 AM.

“Hi! This is Agent Bronkowski.”

“Hi, Phil. This better be a life and death situation; I have hardly had four hours of sleep.”

“Have you traced Mia “Angel Face” Wang?”

Sanders was now wide awake. “If this is a crude attempt to poke fun at me, then you have a poor sense of humor. No, I have not!”

Bronkowski paused for a few moments, letting her collect her thoughts. “I have a theory I want to run by you…”

“I am listening,” Sanders realized from his tone that he was serious.

“What if Mia escaped to America, to rendezvous with one of the candidates?”

“Go on…”

“She could have used a submarine to hop across from China to the West Coast and met one of the candidates…”

“It is possible, and I can find out from the Pacific Submarine Monitoring Agency (PASMA) if there was indeed a sub that crossed some of the magnetometer sensors that we have put on ocean beds along all the sea routes on the Pacific.”

“Check for return date of around October 11th…”

“What is your theory?”

“If Mia came into the US and met with one of the candidates, even for a brief period of time, just to convey a message and then disappear again, she should be headed back to China by now.”

Sanders was fully awake. “I am sorry I snapped at you. You have a point. I will pursue this through and let you know if I find anything.”

“And I will try and watch all the footage on the West Coast events to try and see if I can establish a connection,” Bronkowski said. At this time, they agreed that till they have solid evidence, to just keep this between them.

Bronkowski kept thinking. If indeed Angel Face had come to the US, she would have to be at some important event relating to the Presidential campaign, given the connections that the intelligence agencies had made between her and the election. Could she have been at a fundraiser? It was only a hunch, but an informed one, and the FBI operative was not willing to let go. He, therefore, flew down to Oregon. He went through the video footage but did not find anything — not surprising because Angel Face had met Valdez after the cameramen had departed. Bronkowski then called for the guest list for the event and asked the chief organizer if there had been any last-minute changes in the list. Somewhat off-handedly, the organizer said that some guests may have been substituted. Bronkowski pressed further, much to the man’s irritation. He reminded him that this was a federal investigation, and his cooperation was for his own good. Chastened, the organizer said that a Chinese American millionaire had switched his niece with a guest at the last moment.

“Did you run a security check on the new guest?” Bronkowski asked.

The Democratic Party organizer studied Bronkowski with amazement. “Security check? No, sir. We cannot possibly have security check on the hundreds of people who attended. Besides, the new person was a guest of one of our major donors.”

He continued, “Such last-minute requests are common. Moreover, because of pandemic concerns, people drop out and others take their place. Surely you don’t expect us to turn away a donor by asking too many questions, do you?”

Bronkowski demanded and got the address of the Chinese American millionaire. When he entered the address into his map software, it showed an industrial area. He knew immediately that this was a setup all along. He made a note to follow up on the donation check and the bank that issued the check. That was for later; For now, he smelled something and wanted to confirm it.

He made his way to The Melody Meeting and Event Center, located in the downtown area of Portland. It boasted of hosting several election fundraisers. It had a Ballroom that could accommodate up to 400 guests for banquets, weddings, quinceañeras, auctions, galas, and fundraisers.

With nearly 6,000 square feet, a 30-foot-high ceiling made of ivory and gold tones, an expansive hardwood floor for dancing and crystal chandeliers, the Melody Ballroom is the hotel’s crown jewel. Smaller events and meetings happen in the Morrison, Portlandia, Hawthorne and Broadway rooms, featuring plenty of natural light.

Then there is The Keep, a former speakeasy with a fun vibe, including a lounge built-in bar, TV, and pool table, and even a cabaret-style theater space providing a fantastic spot for parties, weddings, performances, and other lively events.

The concierge at the hotel was helpful and pointed Bronkowski to the Security Chief of the hotel, who was very respectful once the FBI operative made him aware that he would be assisting on an issue of national security.

Going through the recordings, on the day of the fundraiser and looking at the assemblage, Bronkowski placed Mia “Angel Face” Wang, zoomed in, and got clips of all the videos featuring her. He then uploaded them to a secure server at the Bureau HQ and had them confirm if the person in the videos and Mia Wang were one and the same. After a few hours, a detailed report stating that she had undergone plastic surgery and some features had changed, but that it was indeed Angel Face.

And just like that she had disappeared. As the meeting ended and people crowded around the candidate to take pictures, the cameras could not keep up. And soon the feed ended. But it at least confirmed that Mia Wang had indeed come.

Victor Valdez resurfaced in the video, getting into his suite with his Chief of Staff and the rest of the entourage — this was seen in the CCTV feed from the floor he was put up at the hotel.

What remained unanswered was whether he had met Mia.

# 34

S

anders called Bronkowski, as promised. “I have some information of a Chinese nuclear submarine Sheng Class having traveled from close to Beijing to near the coast of Oregon. A couple of days later, it returned via a different path, and we lost track of it on the high seas in the Pacific. They must have found a way to skip being detected by the magnetometer or set course on a path that is not usually traveled.”

The FBI man was pleased with the info. He shared his part, “I have confirmation that Mia “Angel Face” Wang was at a Valdez fundraiser and can say for sure they must have met – I just do not have the footage to prove it. Clearly, something ensued, and she returned after delivering something… a message perhaps, or some material. It could be that the material itself was the message.”

Sanders responded, “Let us write up both our findings and send it to our bosses, citing follow-up action on Angel Face. I will continue to use my assets to locate her current hiding place.”

“Roger that,” he said and hung up.

Edwards and Warner soon got a status report from Bronkowski and Sanders, respectively. They met after a White House briefing and decided that the two agents should continue to investigate and not raise any flags for now. No crime has been committed yet… they pointed out. Besides, there was no sense in going overboard and alerting the Chinese.

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Sept 21 - 43 days to Election Day

As polling neared, preparations were on to conduct the elections through the Electronic Voting Machines. These machines were delivered by a firm named Digitalis to more than 25 states. Sections of the media had reported that Digitalis happened to be very same company that had provided Electronic Voting Machines to the dictator who ruled a South American nation by brute force.

He used the machines to rig the polls, win by a landslide and present himself before the democratic Western world as a legitimate leader. Some of the nations took the bait and lavished monetary aid to his country for humanitarian purposes — needless to say, much of that money went into the dictator’s offshore bank accounts.

Digitalis also had another connection, according to the media. It was linked to Global Foundation, an NGO managed by an influential Democratic Party donor.

The Electronic Voting Machine had been put to trial runs before being selected to be part of the democratic process of the world’s oldest democracy. Several discrepancies were noticed. One, that its image quality was lower than the specifications it promised. Two, its inaccuracy rates were as high as 50 percent. Three, votes polled in favor of one dummy candidate actually translated into votes for the other dummy candidate.

As if this was not enough, some States had decided to lower the accuracy rate benchmark while selecting Digitalis, on the ground that it was the best available machine on offer. A few other States had, inexplicably, decided to use the machines to completely replace the signature verification process.

Ballot papers are printed by the respective counties with checking and double checking of the ballots to ensure all the issues/ candidate names, their party affiliations are entered. Citizens vote not only on Presidential election but also on a Congressional seat, local / state elections etc. all printed on ballot paper which could sometimes run into 4 to 5 pages long. Against each name/ issue is a check box that the voter is supposed to fill by a pen or pencil completely so that when the ballot paper is scanned by the Electronic Voting Machine, the vote will register clearly for the correct candidate.

On both sides of the ballot paper, bar codes are put to make the Electronic Voting Machine to sync correctly for the names so that the votes appear for the same candidate. If, say, a thousand ballots have the names switched in a county (one candidate in place of another or vice-versa) then the vote count also gets switched. This can be identified only if all the ballots are meticulously scrutinized manually.

Now, as if the dubiousness of Digitalis were not sufficient, came intelligence reports that more than one million ballots had been printed headed for Michigan from China, a key battleground State in the US Presidential election. Later, a truck driver, who had been on the CIA/ FBI radar for his complicity in delivering the ballot papers, was apprehended, and admitted to the authorities that he had been hired to deliver the ballots to Michigan.

The catch was, the ballots were also printed more than what had been ordered by the election authorities, right there in the US. This did not surprise Dr. Lee, as he ran presses overnight once the final ballots started printing in Michigan, with identical ballots except for the name switch.

Lee mulled over the ways in which the US Presidential election was being subverted. He was a naturalized citizen of the US and was concerned that on the outside chance that he would return to Stanford, he would not be caught for treason. Hence any measures he was suggesting would be difficult to prove. But were these enough?

# 35

Olga had played her role to perfection. Right from being the reluctant teacher to being persuaded. In reality, she had no interest in giving piano lessons to the capitalists. Nor was she bent on becoming rich — she and her family were being generously taken care of by her employer, Russia’s FSB (Federal Security Service). The only reason she had considered the unsuspecting Woods’ request was to gain a foothold in the circuit of the US’s influential. Her main target was Victor Valdez, the upcoming political star.

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Sept 24 - 40 days to Election Day

D

r. Lee was sitting in a meeting called by the Chinese Premier to track the US elections. Unbeknownst to him, the Premier had set up another group (Team Three) that was tasked with the ground game on American soil, once the rigged ballots were in place.

Many of the counties the teams were targeting had strong Republican preference. It was here that the ground game had to take over. The plan was to switch the ballots at the county headquarters, for which they needed help.

“Run it by us one more time, Dr. Lee,” the Premier said, setting the ball rolling.

“Ahem,” Dr. Lee cleared his throat importantly. “We have two groups of states, five in one and four in the other. For the first five states, we will be using Plan A, and Plan B is for the other,” He shared copies of two thin flexible folders with a few pages in each.

The data provided was detailed and meticulous and would be the envy of the most reputed research agencies in the US. It had a list of counties and their voting patterns over the past four presidential elections, and the location of the place where the ballots were stored. Lee said to the audience of four, “We need not switch all the ballots. It would serve our purpose even if 60 percent replacement were managed.” He pointed to the names marked in orange; they were the counties where the switch should be made.

“What is the difference between our ballots and theirs?” the Premier asked.

“They are almost identical except for the order in which the names of the US Presidential candidates are listed on the ballot,” Dr. Lee replied.

He continued, “The process of vote tabulation is as follows:

“All the ballot papers are scanned, and these scanned images are then fed into the Electronic Voting Machines.

“The Electronic Voting Machines, in this case, can be of any manufacturer, will be set to check for which box is filled in a range of offsets. Say, the US Presidential candidates are listed as 5, 6 and 7 and the software is programmed to look for a vote for 5 to go Blue (Democrat) and 6 to go Red (Republican).

“Our ballot papers will be replacing have 5 pointing Red and 6 pointing Blue, the opposite of what the program is looking for. Therefore, a Republican voter would fill the box for 5 and when it is counted, it will be counted as being for the Democrats!”

The Chinese Premier smiled. It was as close to a compliment as possible that Dr. Lee was going to get.

“But it can surely be caught. What about that possibility?” The Premier was not going to leave things to chance.

Dr. Lee said confidently, “It can be caught in two ways – the Electronic Voting Machine does an Optical Character Recognition (OCR) of each scanned ballot and matches the name and not the index. Or the votes are counted manually. There too, they would have to keep the original and modified ballot papers side-by-side to check for anomalies. That would happen *only* if someone were specifically go looking for this kind of switching…”

“As for doing OCR, it would take far too long to decode each ballot by looking at the name and we know the Electronic Voting Machine does not do this.”

There was a silence for a few moments as everyone grasped the ingenious way in which the voter and his vote was being stolen.

“What you are saying really is that a manual recount must be avoided at all costs.”

“I have checked Michigan, where the margin has to be less than 2,000 votes for a manual recount. This is easily surmountable. In some states, there is no provision for a manual recount.”

“Why are there so many loopholes?”

Dr. Lee paused, sipped some water, and replied, “America runs on the basis of trust. In most places, the spoken word is as good as a written word. Children from a very early age are taught right from wrong. Ethics and Morals are re-inforced from a very early age in schools. What we are about to do is to exploit that trust and shake the very foundation of the country… One man’s trust is another’s man’s opportunity.” He looked immensely pleased at his twist of phrase.

“Good. That is what I want,” the Premier stood up, as if to say that the meeting was over. “You can go over the other methods with the team, and make sure that our candidate wins.” He waved at Lee as he walked to the adjoining room, where the next meeting was being prepped.

# 36

M

embers of Team Three, went over the methods they planned to employ in the nine states identified. The thoroughness with which they covered the various counties amazed Dr. Lee – some communities, about 10,000 strong, were being bribed with Debit Cards and liquor of the highest caliber (with part of it made in China – when a guy is drunk, he will not know the difference between a Black Label Scotch made in Scotland or the knock-off version from China) supplied as crates.

Team Three had bagged a contract to print ballot papers for Clark County of Nevada. This was the most populous county in the state, being in and around the city of Las Vegas. Fully ten percent more than the required ballots were printed for the county, with the extra shipped to a front corporation in Los Angeles under the invoice “Stationery.” The container was scanned by an X-ray machine by the Customs and let through since all there was, was paper. Team Three embarked on the audacious plan to sign up voters who would be paid hard cash plus a free trip to a Las Vegas casino with $500 betting money. The team reckoned the voters would not be asking too many questions, with such allurements on offer.

They hacked into the voting database of Clark County and obtained the voters lists. Using artificial intelligence and data obtained from stealing user profiles — something that China had mastered over the years (it had built server blades for big tech companies with snooping hardware that would keep a watch on the content running on the servers, and call home with the data). They could identify the ones that were dead or had moved on from the address that they had provided. Since most sites ran on an Open-Source software called the LAMP (Linux, Apache, MySQL, and PHP) stack, it was relatively easy to obtain the data.

The state of Nevada required only proof of address, not a Photo ID. One of the acceptable forms of ID was a Paycheck with the address. Team Three had come up with an ingenious solution for this – they created a company that ran payroll for the voters, at minimum wages for 12 weeks. There was a catch – they needed to return the paychecks back in order to be paid for their “trouble.”

The voters were not transported by buses. Instead, they were driven by car from LA and taken to the specific booths to cast their votes. All had fake identity cards of people who had either moved out of Nevada or were dead. The Post Offices that were allowing people to vote early were not required to look for Photo ID, and after only a cursory glance, accepted the ballots. All these were for the Gallagher-Valdez duo. Some were even queried by local paparazzi as to who they voted for and they proudly said, “Team Valdez.”

The ‘voters’ were thereafter driven straight to The Strip that housed most of Las Vegas’s casinos. Each was given five hours and $500 dollars, as promised, to try their luck at the Venetian. The players were monitored closely, using CCTV cameras to ensure there was not too much interaction with the gambling crowds that were thronging about. There was always a chance that somebody would speak too much.

It is not that the so-called voters had not tried to converse before, while being taken to the booths. One of them had turned to another in the neighboring seat, and said, “Hi! What’s your name?” But before the other could respond, a member of Team Three intervened, “I would appreciate, guys, if you would cut the small talk. You all are being taken care of well, and the least you can do is listen to our small request.” There was no talking after that. None of the ‘voters’ wanted to lose out on the privileges.

At the casino, except for one or two who tried their hand at Blackjack, most had frittered away their money, returned empty-handed, inebriated, and slept most of their way back home. When they disembarked, ten crisp hundred-dollar bills in exchange for their paychecks were handed to each with a stern warning to keep their mouths shut.

Mid-sized cars and Minivans ferried about five passengers per trip, making close to 2,000 trips over a ten-day period to register all the fake votes. The final margin of victory was less than 3000. Team Gallagher would forever be grateful… to the dead.

Dr. Lee went back to his office and started calculating the odds of a Team Gallagher win, equipped with all the data that he had collected from his meetings with the other teams. With 30 days to go, it looked like it might be just enough to get them over the finish line. But like an itch, there was a nagging thought that kept plaguing Lee. There was something he was missing, something subtle.

All the calculations were based on the voting trends of the past four Presidential elections. What these calculations did not account for, was the effect of a wave in favor of one candidate or the other. With thirty days to the election, the percentage swing that could potentially occur had not been addressed in Lee’s calculations. After all, frauds can work if the swing on either side is minimal. If there is a shift in favor of one candidate, manipulation of votes through fraudulent voting in a few states, even the important ones, would simply not be enough.

What Lee was missing would become clear when the results started coming out on Election Day.

# 37

A few years ago…

O

lga Berezin was a sought-after piano teacher in the snooty West Palm Beach neighborhood. Filthy rich families, who wanted every edge that their child could possibly get in life, lined up to be interviewed by her, so that their children could learn the piano. The parents had to pass an interview for the children to learn from her!

They did not care for the music, of course, but performing arts has a snob value, just like paintings. Most rich families owned expensive paintings from renowned artists, paintings they understood little but had picked up enough lines to talk of their basics. Pushing their wards into learning music too was part of that desire. It did not matter if any of the children hated music; they had to learn. And learn from the best — the ‘best’ here defined by a person who was most sought after by the glitterati, who had a high profile, who boasted of a client list that served as the society’s Who’s Who.

Berezin was all of that. Besides, she was an accomplished pianist of no small repute. One, who would have gone on to scale great heights in music and make a name for herself in the global arena, if not for a chance meeting with Matt Woods in a New York after-concert party.

Some time ago, in a concert conducted by the Indian-origin famed orchestrator Zubin Mehta — who had had a long association with the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra, besides being the toast of many others — she had been the lead pianist, who got the honor of playing Beethoven’s Piano Concert No. 4. She was brilliant in bringing out the original fire of a Beethoven composition. The orchestra consisted of a flute, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, two horns, two trumpets, timpani, and strings. She was the sole pianist and executed her role to perfection, drawing praise from the maestro, Zubin Mehta himself. The adrenaline was still pumping when, to a rousing applause, she made her entry to the after-concert party.

She was still relatively young and suave, completely at ease in the crowd of high achievers. She felt neither daunted nor inferior, secure in the knowledge that she was the best in the chosen field of activity. One of her long-term plans was to someday reach Zubin Mehta’s stature, and like him leave a legacy that was recognized not just in Central Europe but also the United States of America — New York, especially — and in Germany. At least that was the back story her spy trainer Andropov had created for her.

Berezin had studied her hero in depth. She had been angered at the treatment the New York Philharmonic had given the maestro after all that he had done for them. And not just them, even the Press in New York had been unfair to him. She aspired to reach a level when she would be invited to conduct the New York Philharmonic — she would then, a mark of defiance, dedicate her performance to Zubin Mehta. But that was for the future — one that was not to come. Destiny had other plans for her.

The praise for her at the after-convent event was fulsome, as it was effusive and genuine. Many knowledgeable patrons even picked the places where she had really shone and that made her feel really good. Nothing gives an artist more satisfaction than a knowledgeable audience appreciating his/ her work. As she moved around in the party, she was greeted by Woods, and was surprised by what he said.

“I bet you worked your butt off to pull that event.” As always, Woods came straight to the point. On his arm was his first wife Fiona, who was trying to pat his hand, as if to say, ‘Calm down’. In a roomful of admirers, this direct remark was off-putting, to say the least. The consummate professional that she was, Olga Berezin gathered her wits, smiled and said, “Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t! How do you know?”

“I don’t! It is my way of saying that you did a great job.”

“And you have a unique way of saying it,” she retorted. Though her lips were smiling, her eyes were steel blue.

Woods understood quickly that he was confronted with a tigress, not a tame musician. “Touché!” he acknowledged. “Perhaps I can get you some champagne. What would you like?” Woods was signaling for a waiter even as he was completing the question.

“I will have the best wine in the house, since you are paying,” Berezin was smiling as she said that. Fiona saw the feisty woman standing in front and smiled back. “Matt has met his match,” she told herself.

Woods could not back out of the offer, having promised.

After a couple of drinks, the three were sitting at a table, chatting away. As they discussed the ebbs and flows in the concert, Woods deftly changed the topic.

“Olga, (by now, they were on first name terms) you can make three times the money that you are making now if you move to West Palm Beach. Most of the rich are from New York and will know all about you by lunchtime tomorrow.”

“And what will I do there?”

“Teach the kids of the rich and famous piano! The prestige and pride of having their kids learn from a maestro is bragging rights for them at dinner parties, where ‘look-what-my-kids-are-doing’ will be discussed with an underlying message, ‘My kids are better than yours!’”

Olga said, “What makes you think I am angling for riches from my music? I would have greater satisfaction playing at the best orchestras under prominent conductors, even one day conducting a leading orchestra too.”

“No doubt, and I respect your commitment to music,” Woods said hurriedly, wondering if he had approached the subject from a wrong angle. “But surely you will appreciate that money is important too. Besides, look at it this way — you will be sharing your expertise with so many other young students who will then want to be like you. You would be an inspiration, a teacher who thought of others rather than a performer who only thought about herself.”

Woods leaned back and took a sip. He had made his pitch.

She studied him silently for a couple of minutes and said softly, “Guess now I know you better.” Fiona threw her head back and laughed. Woods didn’t know how to respond.

Fiona saved him the blushes and intervened, “We have two children and would consider it a privilege if they could learn from you.”

“Hmm,” Olga said.

Fiona continued, “We have an extra house where you can stay. Once you settle there, the clientele will rush to you.”

Woods nodded approvingly and added, “Anytime you feel uncomfortable, you can leave. You will still have a career waiting out there for you.”

They talked more about it; the terms were generous and the weather at West Palm Beach, gorgeous. Berezin agreed. She had a couple of other commitments, which she needed to complete. Thereafter, she took up residence at the West Palm Beach. She stayed for just a few days before finding a beach-facing condo.

As Fiona had predicted, there was a clamor for the services of Berezin; her reputation had preceded her arrival at the place. She could pick and choose the kids to teach.

So far, Olga had played her role to perfection. If there were awards for role-playing by spies, she would be a contender for the best supporting role. She had no interest in giving piano lessons to the capitalists, nor was money an issue — she and her family were being generously taken care of by her employer, Russia’s FSB (Federal Security Service). The reason was to gain a foothold in the circuit of the US’s influential, in particular Victor Valdez, the upcoming political star.

The FSB is a successor organization of the Soviet Committee of State Security (KGB). The KGB was dismantled, and it ceased to exist from November 1991. Over the years, the FSB grew into a formidable entity with unlimited funds at its disposal to pursue Russian interests abroad, through covert means.

Olga did not become a spy by merely being a good pianist. Once she had been spotted and persuaded to serve Mother Russia’s secret service, she was put to nearly seven years of intense training. She studied at the Eastman School of Music at Rochester, New York, and the study was sponsored by the FSB’s secret funds.

Her chief trainer was Mikhail Andropov, a spy with a sterling reputation, one that even his foes acknowledged. His expertise lay in tutoring spies to behave like citizens of the country they operated in, even when they did not hide the country of their origin.

Such was the training that the double life they lived merged into one — the assumed became the real. The information gathered from such agents was funneled back to their handlers through various clandestine means - radio, dead shops, or secret meetings abroad. After that training, in which she excelled in every field, Olga worked in the US, eventually becoming a handler herself. Trapping Valdez was the biggest assignment of her life so far.

# 38

Cyber-snooping, that is trying to monitor the data moving across the world’s networks can be done in two ways - One to intercept data and manipulate it when it is in transit from the sender to the receiver. The other process is to seed changes from the very beginning, which is what the experts suspected China of doing.

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Sept 30 - 34 days to Election Day

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lga had settled down to a routine. She had just finished the piano lessons for the kids. It was her last class for the day. Sometimes, she would hang back for tea and snacks, especially if Mary were around. As luck would have it, Mary was in and she had asked her to stay for afternoon snacks.

For Olga, this was a stroke of good luck. She had been giving music lessons for quite a while and it was time for her to gain access to Valdez. Time was ticking and there was barely a month left for the Presidential elections.

After the usual pleasantries, Mary asked probing questions of how the kids were progressing in their piano lessons, their theory, their practice and so on. Olga enthusiastically said, “Oh, they are fine children. Very bright and smart. They have talent and I think they are picking the lessons just fine.”

It was as if the teacher was giving a report card of what she got the kids to do. Over hot scones, butter cookies and rich, creamy coffee, they were soon talking about everything under the sun, including future plans. Olga told her that once she was done with the teaching, she wished to conduct for the world’s best orchestras — even have her own orchestra. “Why not!” Mary said in encouragement.

“How is Senator Valdez doing?” Olga started the ball rolling, asking casually.

“He is doing fine. With still a month to go, it is a lot of travel and I decided to stay back to be with the kids and only go to the important events.”

“I admire the way in which you are balancing your family life along with that of Senator’s public duties.”

“Thank you,” Mary said, “Though I must admit it is at times really trying. It gets on my nerves.”

“I saw from the TV that he was in Portland, six days ago.”

“Yes, I saw that speech live he gave. Brilliant, wasn’t it?”

Berezin saw that the conversation was not going the way she wanted. She had no desire to spend precious hours expanding on Valdez’s brilliance as an orator or hearing him praised to the skies. She needed to course correct, but the right opening was not coming.

“It was?” she remarked. “Sadly, I missed it. I am an early riser, see…”

Mary continued gushingly, “By the time he was finished, the audience was eating out of his hands! The buzz I heard was that they could not wait for him to run for President!”

“Of course…” Olga said smilingly. “he appears to be eminently qualified, from what I see and hear. Good looking, smart, an excellent orator. Having come up the hard way, and all that. Plus, a wonderful family.”

Olga decided that today was not the day to bring up the important information that she had in her hand, on Valdez. It would have to wait for another day.

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Russia had videotaped the happenings in the chamber where Valdez and the Chinese spy, Mia “Angel Face” Wang, had their tryst. Despite the US secret service doing a thorough check of the premises, the Russians had managed to get a copy. Clearly, they had an insider on the job, or stealth technology that the US was unaware of.

Russia had new video recording equipment that beat any electronic checking equipment. Because it was not made of Electronics, but Electromechanical – something that can be turned on only when needed. A watchful Russian spy who happened to be at the fundraiser saw the anteroom empty and Valdez disappear inside the room with Angel Face. He then activated the Record button. And thus, they had a copy of Valdez’s indiscretion.

The Russians were clever, if nothing else, in placing the camera made by one of their companies that specialized in stealth technology. It was in a hat that was perched inside the room, giving a clear picture of the place. The hat hung innocuously on a coat hanger, something that is typically found in Oregon hotels, because it rains so much.

There was no need for someone inside the room to switch on the camera. It could be, and was, activated from outside within a 12-foot radius. That is how the Russian operator turned it on. The hat was collected hours later, with nobody from the Valdez camp or his security detail being any wiser.

The question was: How and when the explosive information could be used to get the maximum leverage possible?

# 39

Oct 2 - 32 days to Election Day

T

he Chinese Premier wanted to maintain the heat on his rivals, Bang and Lin Liguo. So far, he had done fine, turning adversity into advantage. Angel Face was Lin’s asset but was now under his control. And so was Lin, to an extent. The Premier was determined to enhance this hold further, and thus he planned to gain leverage with Lin’s daughter, son-in-law, and granddaughter too.

He would find ways to achieve that end, just in case Lin entertained some last-minute smart antics. The fellow would fight on till the last, the Premier said to himself, unless he was kept on a tight leash till the end. The best way was to use Lin’s family as leverage.

Meanwhile, he had to also ensure that the control he had established on Angel Face was not loosened. She had cultivated some of the high-ranking Democrats in the United States of America. Also, she would play an important role in cutting Lin down to size later on. This would be ironic, the Premier chuckled as he thought about it. Angel Face had so far been an instrument in Lin’s hands to promote his ambitions; now she would be made to work against his interests.

The last that the Premier had heard was that Lin’s son-in-law Xi “Beijing Bob” Ming, daughter An and their daughter Sara were holed up in a penthouse in Taipei. His secret services people had kept a hawk’s eye on them. But apparently somebody had been cleverer than the Chinese sleuths. News reached the Premier that they had flown the coop. The last that his agents could reconstruct of the escape was that the family had been transported by a US military helicopter from the roof of their building, and straight to the US military base in the city at 3 AM on a Saturday night.

Suddenly, the Chinese leader was not feeling all that good. He realized the setback disappearance from his effective custody could mean to his plans to both consolidate his hold over office and to decimate his ambitious rivals. There was every possibility of Beijing Bob, his wife An and their daughter proceeding to the US and entering into a Witness Protection Program. If that happened, they would be safely resettled somewhere in that country, and be out of reach to the Chinese leadership for good.

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Xi “Beijing Bob” Ming, An Liguo-Ming and their daughter Sara Ming were stealthily airlifted into Seattle and placed in an upscale apartment complex that had a fully functioning ecosystem around it. There were restaurants, supermarkets, banks, and schools within walking distance. They were the guests of the US Government and the place was carefully chosen so as to minimize contact with the outside world, at the same time, easing them into a western lifestyle. Sara was only three and would have time to settle down.

The US Government had not decided whether to put them in a Witness Protection Program, also known as the Witness Security Program (WitSec) or send them back to China in the event Lin Liguo became the Premier. The Mings were not being hunted by gangs, nor were they criminals, which meant that WitSec was not exactly suited for them. In any case, a call on that was still several months away – at this point, the US was merely guarding the family from the Premier. The leverage could be useful in the event Liguo became the Premier.

The Federal Witness Protection Program is codified by US law. It is administered by the United States Department of Justice and operated by the United States Marshals Service, that is designed to protect threatened witnesses before, during, and after a trial involving serious crimes.

The U.S. Marshals Service takes care of the security, health and safety of government witnesses and their immediate dependents, whose lives are in danger as a result of their testimony against major criminals.

Under this program, witnesses and their families get new identities with authentic documentation. Housing, subsistence for basic living expenses and medical care are provided to the witnesses. Job training and employment assistance may also be provided. U.S. Marshals provide 24-hour protection to all witnesses, while they are in a high-threat environment including pretrial conferences, trial testimonials and other court appearances.

# 40

Shanghai – Bang’s residence

B

ai “Bang” Yang and his wife had recently moved into a mansion in the upscale neighborhood in the French Concession area of Shanghai, where the rich and international jet-set resided. They had taken possession of the top two floors of a luxury apartment complex, with special access elevators to escort the Chinese leader to his office, located just a few minutes away.

Bang could afford the luxury. Over the years, by virtue of being an important member of the communist party, he had had ample opportunity to line his pockets. The Chinese government and the party swore by socialist ideals and scoffed at capitalism, but that did not prevent its leaders from taking bribes when it came to their own interests.

They promoted crony capitalism and used it to get rich. Bang had once remarked to a close associate, “Socialism is for public display, and capitalism is for private use.”

Of late, he had got even more ambitious, more so after he had been, according to the new deal struck with the Premier, that all the ministries he was overseeing in Beijing would now be run by him from Shanghai. His top bureaucrats from these ministries also took up residence in Shanghai. Life was normal, or so it was made to appear. The bureaucrats would take his orders and work on implementing them. ‘Matters not where you work from – matters what you do’, seemed to be the motto of the government as it was being operated from Shanghai.

What Bang had failed to realize was that, by distancing himself from the power center, which Beijing was, he was giving up ground to the Premier to have a free run. Slowly, he saw to his horror that his wings were being systematically clipped, his powers taken away, leaving him with less and less to do.

The Premier was bypassing the top bureaucrats and Bang and working directly below, with an express threat that no one was to reveal this to the top bureaucrats or to Bang. In a communist China, where people were afraid to even speak loudly, orders from the top were obeyed to the letter.

In six months, Bang would be deciding where to source uniforms for the dear soldiers of the People’s Liberation Army. He had been systematically sidelined.

Soon enough, rumor mills began to churn out news that his ministries were now being effectively handled by Lin Liguo, and that it was he who was trying to pull the rug from under Bang’s feet. This made Bang furious. He dispatched one of his trusted lieutenants to Beijing to ascertain the truth. The lieutenant never returned. They had agreed on a radio silence and Bang was sure that his man would be safe in Beijing.

“What happened?” he wondered. The thought of the man being eliminated — not an improbability, sent a shiver down his spine. “I should not have agreed to this,” he chided himself. He did not have any children and it was his burning ambition to be the Premier, even if for just a short time. If there was a way he could reach out to Lin, he could perhaps contain the damage by winning the man to his side.

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Meanwhile, Lin Liguo was under no illusion regarding the plans the Premier had for him. When he took up residence in Taipei, he had effectively communicated to the US that, in exchange for the Premiership of China, he would give US a free rein in “democratizing” his country. He was disgusted at the “True Chinese blood-ification” project that the Premier had embarked upon.

Even though Lin was brought up in a Communist family, he was still a Buddhist at heart and knew that as long as he appeared to be holding some power, his bargaining strength with the US would be higher than if he became a fugitive and took residence in the US. He too saw his teeth being pulled, one tooth at a time, but still soldiered on. He had access to several secrets of the Premier. They were his “family jewels”, that he would reveal to the world if and when needed.

There were issues that Lin could exploit, especially if the West was on his side, when push came to shove. One of them was China’s persecution of Muslim minorities and the Tibetans. The other was the cult-personality worship, which was an echo of Mao’s reign. Muslim minorities and Tibetan leaders were continuously monitored using technological advancements and ruthlessly suppressed. The idea was to crush their culture and their religion.

Religious statues had been destroyed; temples were directed to showcase portraits of the Premier in order to avoid demolition. Muslim, Tibetan and Christian religious leaders were selected by the communist party. The massacre of thousands of Tibetans was a matter of global concern and intermittent debate and discussion. Tibetans were being treated as second-class citizens and were being arbitrarily detained for indefinite time periods on suspicions of separatism.

The Chinese leadership had sought to project the developments as an internal affair of their country. Lin believed that it could be used to weaken the Premier’s position when the right time came. He told his confidant, “Wait for the right moment, my friend. He will crumble like a pack of cards.”

Lin had several plans in mind, and he was working on them, with only a couple of his trusted associates being privy to them. One of the plans was to invite the US to occupy a few of the barracks that the United Kingdom had left behind in Hong Kong. The pretext would be to ‘save democracy’ in the supposedly autonomous region. It was as audacious a plan as it was courageous.

The other was to organize a coup and displace the Premier. Lin had cultivated people in the higher echelons of power, and with the right incentive, they would be willing to do his bidding. He also had a section of the military, which was not too pleased with the rising personality cult, on his side. But he needed a foreign hand to back him — the hand of Uncle Sam.

But all his plans would have to wait until after the US Presidential elections. A great deal depended on who the next President would be. Which is why Lin, like the Premier, was eagerly clued in on the developments in the world’s oldest democracy. The plan he would adopt would rest on whether Lin could influence the next President of the US.

# 41

Oct 13 - 21 days to Election Day

T

he election campaign was now at its peak, with barely three weeks to go. The Presidential candidates were rushing about from state to state, squeezing every bit of the advantage they enjoyed and ironing out last-minute wrinkles.

In three days, the third and final debate between the candidates would be held. The outcome of that encounter would considerably impact the prospects of the hopefuls, perhaps even turn decisive. Understandably therefore, the two sides were burning the midnight oil along with their campaign managers, PR consultants and speech writers.

Till now, the race had been a dead heat. Bill Adams was stirring his aromatic Island Blue Coffee, made from Jamaica Blue Mountain Ground Coffee. He appeared calm and relaxed. So far, he had done the best he could and was prepared for the third and final debate. He had sat with his team and brainstormed over his performance in the last two debates. Flaws had been identified and ironed out, and the applauses had been noted. It was now time for the final kill.

He saw a text message from his Chief Legal Officer (CLO). It was cryptic and ominous – “We have a problem. On my way over.”

Even though Adams had given up control of day-to-day operations to a Chief Executive Officer, he was still the largest shareholder and the Chairman of the Board of Nile Systems. It was possible that this had something to do with the firm. The CLO arrived in 20 minutes.

He said, “I just got a class-action lawsuit from a reputed firm based in Chicago. They are suing us for not making information public about the data leak that happened on our Web servers, which could have potentially harmed the intellectual property of thousands of companies that were hosting their company websites on our hardware. If it gets into the hands of Team Gallagher at this stage, things could get very difficult for us.”

Class action suits are most common where the allegations usually involve at least 40 people who have been aggrieved by the same defendant in the same way. Instead of each damaged person bringing his or her own lawsuit, the class action allows all the claims of all class members. Interestingly, it does not matter whether they know they have been damaged or not.

Class actions survived in the United States largely due to the influence of Supreme Court Associate Justice Joseph Story, who brought it into US law through summary discussions in one of the cases he adjudicated on.

Adams, of course, knew the history. For now, he was glad that his CLO said ‘us’ instead of ‘you’.

“So, what do you suggest we do?” he asked, emphasizing on ‘we’.

“First tell me if it is true.”

“Absolutely not! Nile did not have any systems that had this problem. But when we were doing due diligence on acquiring a Portland-based video content delivery startup, they mentioned that some of their servers had what they called as “ET Call Home!” chips, which would periodically update the data from their servers to a set of countries friendly towards China. Think Cuba, Venezuela, North Korea. We then laid down the condition that they should strip their servers of all such hardware and only then integrate it into our systems. I believe the law firm is just fishing.”

“Okay then. I will then send them the usual denial letter that we dispatch to all class-action lawsuit firms. We will do that at the end of the week and by the time the response comes, the elections will be over.”

“Good. Anything else?”

“Are you one-hundred percent sure Nile did not procure the same hardware? Have you done an internal audit?”

“I will have my Vice President of Web Services do a deep-check and double check to ensure that we do not have this issue.”

When contacted, the Veep of Web Services was, however, evasive. Without saying a Yes or a No, he kept prefacing his answers with “As far as I know…”

After three such replies, Adams lost his cool and yelled, “Will you make up your mind and give me a Yes or a No? Did I give you a Maybe option?”

The official was chastened. He said meekly, “I will do a thorough, in-depth search and also check and run our Cyber firewall software to look for any major data dumps to China-sympathetic nations like North Korea and Cuba.”

“How long before I know a firm Yes or No?”

“72 hours.”

“You have 24 hours. Text me your findings and email me the detailed report. I will be on my way to Denver for the third debate and I do not want to be ambushed by Gallagher.”

The CLO, who was watching the back-and-forth conversation, nodded to Adams, and replied, “I will keep you posted.”

Adams slumped in his chair. He did not have a good feeling about this one. Especially since, he recalled, that the President had mentioned that other companies too had been hit by this hardware. Adams had a general idea of how this could be done. The Chinese were experts at it and the Americans too had made strides in the direction, especially to assist the CIA in its operations.

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There was nothing basic about Basic Technologies, the company Nile Systems had acquired. It made servers that used state of the art hardware and software for compressing massive video files and formatting them for different devices. Its technology had helped communicate with space stations, and give drone footage to the CIA.

Customers installed Basic’s servers in their networks to handle video compression. On the servers’ motherboards, were placed tiny microchips, not much bigger than a grain of rice, that weren’t part of the boards’ original design. They were meant to do just what Adams was apprehensive of. To spy on what data was going across as well as to open the doors of the server to apps that might want to intrude to take a peek. The latter was diabolical – someone far away could sample data regularly and insert malware only when they were sure there was data of value to be intercepted.

When experts dug into Basic’s server boards, they found that special chips had been inserted at factories run by manufacturing subcontractors in China, in place of line capacitors, components that are used to suppress noise on data lines. That the special chips looked very close to line capacitors made it difficult to spot them.

There are two ways for spies to fiddle with the core of computer equipment. One is to intercept data and manipulate it when it is in transit from manufacturer to customer. This approach is favored by U.S. spy agencies too. The other method involves seeding changes from the very beginning, which is what the experts suspected China of doing.

There was a good reason for pointing fingers at China. By some estimates, it makes 75 percent of the world’s mobile phones and 90 percent of its PCs. Having a seeding attack would mean developing a deeper understanding of a product’s design, manipulating components at the factory, and ensuring that the doctored devices made it through the global logistics chain to the desired location — not easy, but doable.

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Gallagher and Valdez were immersed in a meeting trying to figure out how to pull ahead in the forthcoming debate. They needed a home run, something that could put Adams away for good.

Now the news that their opponent, Adams, was being sued was coming their way. As they were bouncing ideas around, Gallagher’s Chief of Staff walked over to show him something: A class-action lawsuit being planned against Nile Systems, for leaking data of customers who were hosting their sites on Nile’s Web Servers.

“I need a simple-to-understand one-page report of what the lawsuit is about, and half a dozen questions with follow-ups so I can put Adams on the mat. China is the offender, eh? This ought to be good.”

There was a spring in Gallagher’s step and Valdez could see the Vice Presidency within his grasp.

“We need to be sure that this lawsuit has merit,” Valdez said, cautiously.

Gallagher nodded and called up his buddy in the Silicon Valley, a nerd who stayed on top of all the technical stuff that swept around the valley.

“Hey Mike, how are you?”

“Ed, What a pleasant surprise! Shouldn’t you be prepping for your debate instead of having a social conversation with me?”

“Precisely why I called. I have a question for you…”

“Shoot.”

“This must remain strictly between us. Apparently, Nile Systems has received a class-action lawsuit from a Chicago-based firm. The purported lawsuit claims that Nile Web Servers may have had chips embedded in them, that leaked data to foreign countries, when commanded. Do you know anything about it?”

“Give me two hours. Let me ask around and I will get back to you. And best of luck for the debate.”

“Thanks! I’ll wait for your call.”

It came ninety minutes later.

Gallagher’s friend said, “There is a strong possibility that Nile Systems may have been affected. Half a dozen Silicon Valley firms were looking into their servers. Something fishy is certainly going on.”

“Thanks,” Gallagher replied. “Your information could be more useful to me than you think.”

Since foreign policy was going to figure in the final debate, Gallagher hoped that China would be mentioned. That was all he needed to bring in the explosive material. He licked his lips in anticipation.

Both Gallagher and Adams were busy in preparing for the decisive debate. Neither of the two was initially convinced that the debate could be that important. Adams told his managers, “Damn it! I have campaigned across the country, talked to audiences, spoken about issues. What’s the big deal about this debate? I can do it without all this fuss that you guys are making about preparing me!”

Gallagher too had been dismissive. “Look,” he told his team, “I can handle the debate easily enough. Why all this prep?”

The preparation was, however, necessary. There was technique and there was strategy. The candidates should not allow themselves to be drawn into issues they were uncomfortable with — and if they were, they must know how to find their way out. They should look into the camera with a clear and expressive face and speak with conviction. There should be no needless pauses in their speech. And they must not, at any cost, lose their temper or get upset or nervous.

As Gallagher’s chief campaign manager remarked, “It’s like preparing for the SATs or any other college test. Except that here, you are out in the open and will be judged instantly. You have no time to go over your answer sheets and make corrections.”

And so, both the candidates underwent mock debate sessions where their colleagues shot off difficult and uncomfortable questions at them, and then corrected the candidate when he slipped. It was a prep session for one ambitious enough to occupy the White House, now having already come so close to it.

# 42

Oct 15 - 19 days to Election Day

D

enver, home of the third and final debate. It started right on time at 7 PM Mountain Standard Time (MST). The Veep of his Web Services had not said anything. But Adams was feeling good. The latest poll showed a bump for him across the country, albeit small. He felt confident that he would be able to pull ahead with his tag line, “A better future.”

Minutes before he was to ascend the stage came the text he was dreading. “There may be a few servers that might have leaked the data. We are checking to see if any data was leaked. For sure, we have identified some suspicious hardware. Will keep you posted.”

He maintained a passive look. There was no reason yet to fret. Perhaps his rival had not got wind of it. Yet. He was wrong on that.

As the hosts outlined the topics, Foreign Policy was the second in the list. Gallagher smiled to himself. By then he would have warmed up and could give Adams a knockout punch, saying, “You were compromising the data of all the companies that were hosting their web sites on your servers. How do you expect the nation to trust you?”

The first round of questions was mostly dealt with by the candidates without much trouble. Adams had not had time to think about how he would deal with the lawsuit if Gallagher brought it up. But he always thought on his feet and was confident he could find his way out.

The CNN host set up the softball question nicely for Gallagher when the turn for foreign policy came. “The President has been breathing down China’s neck, asking it to respect intellectual property, allow US companies access to its markets, failing which he would impose tariffs. How would you handle China?”

“I am glad you asked that question,” Gallagher said. “The US has benefited from the low cost of products manufactured from China. But China has exploited this situation, creating a security issue for us. I do not think my friend Adams here would pose any challenge to that.”

Adams waited, and Gallagher continued, “I say this because his company has, after all, allowed China to steal data from the servers of most of his customers. This happened either due to inefficiency or complicity. In either case, Mr. Adams has much to answer for.”

The anchor looked surprised, and the audience too was taken aback. Gallagher had a smirk on his face. The CNN host intervened, “That’s a serious allegation. I suppose you have evidence for that?”

Gallagher replied, “I have it. But let Mr. Adams deny the charge.”

The ball was now in Adams’ court. This would be his do-or-die moment. The best form of defense had to be offense. He quickly thought it over. Denial would give an opening to his rival to talk about the class action suit. It would be made personal, and the charge would stick firmly.

Adams looked squarely at Gallagher and said in a clear voice, “It was recently, in fact just minutes ago, that I got a text message saying there may have been a hack attack by servers from countries friendly to China. This is preliminary information, and it will take us a few weeks before we can ascertain the extent of data theft.”

He added, “It is preposterous to suggest that I or my firm was complicit in the attack. As for the class action suit, the matter is with my legal team and we shall be taking appropriate action. We have full faith in the American judiciary and legal system. I have nothing to be ashamed of. Besides, Senator Gallagher would be well advised to look around and find which other companies in the US have been hit by the hacker. It’s not about me, but about this great country of ours.”

As Gallagher shook his head, showing he remained unconvinced, Adams continued, “The good news is that we have identified and isolated all the rogue hardware. Our hardware team is working round the clock to ensure that none of our customers experience any disruption. I intend to get to the bottom of this issue and once I find out the culprit, which appears to be China at the moment, I fully intend to make them pay.”

Adams looked directly into the camera as he said this, making it look like he was talking eye-to-eye with each viewer.

Gallagher was not sure if he had landed a knockout punch. Not being a tech-person, he did not know how to follow up. He had expected Adams to deny the accusation, at which point he would have brought up the fact that several companies in Silicon Valley had also been seeing those issues, and so on. With Adams accepting the development, the issue had become a damp squib, or at least no longer much of a talking point, let alone a scoring one. Looking at the body language of the audience, Gallagher felt that Adams’ honest answer had struck a chord.

Gallagher was right. The media worked overtime through the night and discovered that “several” companies had found their servers to be hacked, and all were pointing fingers at China. What looked like a masterstroke by Gallagher had boomeranged. The next round of opinion polls released two days later, uniformly showed a bounce for Adams.

# 43

Oct 19 – 15 days to Election Day

T

he Premier was worried. With just over two weeks to go until the Presidential election, a major scandal implicating China had broken out. Every citizen of the US, every voter of the US, had turned his gaze on Beijing’s wrongdoing, on its internet-snooping devices embedded in computer servers. The Chinese expectedly denied the allegation and said that mischievous elements within the US were seeking to tarnish Beijing’s fair image. The Chinese added that these accusations were made in the backdrop of the Presidential election and were thus motivated.

The anti-China sentiment had become so strong that there seemed every likelihood of a hawk occupying the White House soon, a hawk who would go hard on China under whatever pretext he got —uprising in Hong Kong, unfair trade practices, factionalism in the Chinese leadership, the pandemic, etc. The Premier was aware that there were people in the party and government who would willingly exploit the development and align with the US to see his back.

If Hong Kong was not bad enough, the situation on the India-China border worsened the Premier’s position. When he had ordered Chinese soldiers to secretly cross over into India, to take over Indian space, he had expected little resistance. For one, he had anticipated a delayed response from the Indian authorities. The Indian bureaucracy was notorious for its lethargy and red-tape, and the Defence Ministry bureaucracy even more so. Besides, Beijing had been for some years ‘taking care of’ of some of the Indian bureaucrats through direct bribes.

The Chinese had been right about the laxity. Both India’s Intelligence Bureau and the US intelligence agencies had tipped the Defence Ministry about likely incursions by the PLA, but the Ministry mandarins had simply ignored the warnings. Even after the PLA began moving ahead, the Ministry officials did nothing, indulging in their favorite pastime of “masterly inactivity.”

One bureaucrat sat on an important file for two weeks despite knowing that the Indian Tibetan Border Police, which is posted at the borders with China, and which reports to the Union Home Ministry, had warned that swift action was needed.

The Chinese had also been counting on a meek Indian response — like it had been under various regimes in New Delhi in the past.

Unfortunately for the Chinese Premier and all those Chinese ‘assets’ in the Indian bureaucracy, the Prime Minister of India Hasmukh Jadeja decided to take the matter into his own hands. After seeing things for himself at the border, he let his temper loose at a meeting attended by senior ministers and bureaucrats. “I hold you responsible for the delay in response to an enemy act,” he said, glaring at the mandarins of the Home and the Defence Ministries. He gave clear directions that all clearances should come within 24 hours, for the Indian Armed Forces to act decisively.

At the border and among officers and jawans of the Indian Army and the ITBP, Prime Minister Jadeja asked the forces “to take all necessary action and counter-action to push back the enemy.” He told the officers in charge, “Use force if necessary. The Chinese must be taught a lesson.”

The Indian Prime Minister’s go-ahead having come, the forces acted quickly and firmly, not just pushing back the Chinese soldiers but also inflicting heavy casualties on them. China had to bite the dust, suggest talks to de-escalate, and agree to return to the status quo.

What had been promised as a stunning victory turned out to be a nightmare for Beijing, with the ‘great’ Chinese army losing two of their own for one of India. Despite lining up the pockets of several key decision makers in the Indian bureaucracy and army, there still were enough patriots who put their country above their own self-interest, and whom the Chinese could not tempt or coerce. The Chinese Premier had cut a sorry figure, with the West, including the US, hailing India’s success.

The Chinese Premier was faced with yet another problem. A growing aspirational middle class in China had been weaned on material comforts, and the economic blockade imposed by the virus and the resultant backlash had rendered a body blow to their lifestyle. With every passing month, the discontent was only increasing, and it was only a matter of time before the pressure cooker would burst.

Rattled, the Chinese Premier summoned Dr. Lee to his office. He was seething. The opinion polls were now projecting a five to seven percent lead across the nation for Adams, and unless Gallagher could pull off a miracle, it looked like the Red Party would get another term to continue what the President had begun.

“Dr. Lee, we have a problem. How is your Plan A strategy coming along? Are the nine counties you have chosen enough to get us the desirable outcome? Any tweaks needed?”

“I think so. There is a way the results can be manipulated without changing the total count. Instead, what will change is how the vote gets counted. The machines shipped to the selected counties have been preset with a co-efficient that can move votes of one candidate to another. These vary from 0.13 to 0.06.”

“What does that mean?”

“Say we have 100 votes cast for A and 100 for B. If the co-efficient is set to 0.06, then the number of votes cast for A will show 106 and B, 94.”

“How is that possible?”

“Because the Electronic Voting Machines store the vote as a floating-point data - 1 vote is stored in the memory as 1.00. In these Electronic Voting Machines, 1 vote to A is stored as 1.06. Similarly, 1 vote to B is stored as 0.94.”

“But won’t that show up as a fraction in the final tally?”

“No. The final results are rounded off to the nearest integer.”

“Will all the Electronic Voting Machines have the same 1.06 co-efficient?”

“No. We have picked these based on how the rules of a state are for recount. We want to not get into a situation of a recount, so whatever we do, must be under the radar so as to not arouse suspicion.”

“So, what is the biggest co-efficient being used?”

“In Arizona, where the independent percentage is high, it is set to 0.13.”

“A gets 113 for 100 polled and B gets 87 for 100.”

“Precisely.”

“I see. And you have modeled this and are positive that nothing will arouse any suspicion?”

“I am positive.”

“What are the failure scenarios that you have thought of?”

“Not enough voter turnout. But from the news reports I am hearing that about one in three have sent mail-in ballots. This will not happen.”

“Any other scenarios?”

“There is one, but the chances of that happening are low.”

“Such as?”

“The final co-efficients are going to be uploaded today on the Electronic Voting Machines, based on the trends of today. If say Adams gets significantly more votes on Election Day than the poll forecasts, that could throw a spanner into the works.”

“Should that happen, do you have a mitigation plan?”

“I am working on that.”

“You better have one. If this does not go our way, it will be a disaster.”

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All Electronic Voting Machines are kept under lock and key in the County Election Office and a day before election day, they are dispatched to the polling stations. Before that, on a random basis, two to three Electronic Voting Machines are checked by running mock tests. The Electronic Voting Machines are put in test mode and these tests are run. This is to ensure that there are no residual counts left after running these tests. In “Test” mode, the Electronic Voting Machine does not apply the co-efficient principle. No matter how many times, the results will always be accurate.

The certifying authority at the county level is the County Clerk. All the counts from the various counties comprising the state are tabulated carefully and sent to the Secretary of State of a particular state, who will, after due diligence certifies the results.

Foul play, however, can never be ruled out if vote-fixing is successfully done. It could be dubbed a clerical error at worst, if exposed, but a conspiracy would not be established in any court of law. If the votes were tied equal, then the tabulator machines would be used to re-run the ballots, and ‘adjustments’ could be effected.

Forensic experts, if summoned, could, though not easily, spot the conspiracy. However, that would require will power and legal processes to be undergone. But by then the damage would be done, and massive numbers of votes would have been flipped from one candidate to another.

The Digitalis Voting machines could have (rather, made to have) an error rate of as high as 65 percent. Which meant that 65 percent of the ballots would be sent for bulk adjudication to some other place where people in another location could tamper with them. This is the reason why some States had demanded that the voting machines should not be used, at least in their States.

The role of the County clerk is critical. The clerk is charged with receiving and maintaining court records. The County Clerk can end up publishing wrong vote data and even direct its staff to delete records that may vindicate the falsification of vote numbers.

# 44

Oct 24 – 10 days to Election Day

T

he revelations made in the third Presidential debate about the possibility of servers being compromised — by the Chinese, apparently — set the media on fire. Nearly every major publication, and even the minor ones, began to report at length on the exposure, digging into information to secure ‘exclusives’. The focus was on ‘ET Call Home’ chips-based server boards on the systems of various US and US-based companies.

The Washington Post named it The CallGate, and the moniker stuck. CallGate news was now getting as much limelight as the Presidential elections. There were isolated incidents of these boards being pulled out of the server rack and smashed to pieces in front of raucous crowds.

The senior management of Engineering of a Michigan-based software firm, First Attempt Inc., summoned Press persons and in their presence, removed the board from one of their server racks and hit it to the ground, breaking it into many pieces. Audiences who saw the drama on their television sets, applauded.

In Silicon Valley, an IT company named Secure Tech, and which offered cyber security solutions, also did the same, though not in front of the media but in their offices and issuing a terse statement: “In light of the recent developments, we have taken the drastic step of destroying the boards on our servers with the rogue chip. America comes first, profits later.”

As the anti-China sentiment began reaching a feverish pitch, Adams kept gaining in the opinion polls, much to the dismay of Team Gallagher, and the Chinese Premier. They had been hit by a sledgehammer and they had not seen the blow coming their way — in fact, they had expected the issue to boomerang on the rival camp.

It was time for China to contain the damage. It had sympathizers in the US political circles, as well as in the media, particularly social media. Soon, a section of politicians began to speak out against the outrage. One Senator, whose election to the post had been heavily funded by groups with connections to China, cautioned, “We must not anger China. One isolated incident cannot be allowed to harm our ties with an important country like China.”

Another Congressman commented, “China is an important trading partner of the US. We mustn’t let public sentiment to influence policy decisions that are in the larger interest of our great nation.”

In China, the state-controlled media began to publish opinion pieces on the matter. The Global Times wrote that “certain US politicians were trying to muddy the electoral waters to gain benefits” and that “China always respected the integrity and sovereignty of other countries.” It added that there was a “deliberate attempt to derail the chances of Mr. Gallagher, a respected and mature politician, from getting into the White House.”

The so-called Left-liberal lobby in the United States of America was not far behind. In fact, it appeared as if it was working in tandem with the Chinese design. Various commentaries began to appear in The New York Times, Washington Post and even The New Yorker, chastising Team Adams and claiming that it was working to destabilize relations between the US and China for petty political gains. The Chicago Tribune stated: “It appears that a concerted and vicious campaign has been launched against Gallagher, who has emerged as a sane voice, as opposed to the saber-rattling mob that Mr. Adams leads.”

The Electronic media was also in the fray. CNN organized a debate on the issue, with four political commentators battling it out. Two were on Gallagher’s side and the other two on Adams. But it wasn’t a balanced contest — the anchor seemed leaning towards Gallagher.

“So, what explains this sudden burst of anger against the Chinese?” The tone was more accusatory than questioning. One of the pro-Gallagher panelists responded, “It’s clear that the conspiracy is to derail candidate Gallagher’s reputation. When nothing else worked, the China phobia has been unleashed.”

“Not true,” said one from the pro-Adams rank. “Chips on mother boards of certain severs have been discovered and found to have been inserted to compromise privacy. The China angle too has been established…”

“Established by whom?” asked the second Gallagher supporter.

“Experts have already indicated a China angle. Do you not trust our people?”

The anchor intervened, “This brings us to the core question: Who is best suited to lead the US in these contentious times?”

The second pro-Adams expert replied, “Of course, Adams. He was honest and fair in his admission. That is what the American people would want from their President. Honesty and transparency.”

“No sir,” one from the other camp said vehemently. “We need a President who does not indulge in knee-jerk reactions based on public mood. After all, moods swing all the time. We can’t have a President who is hostage to such mood swings.”

The debate went back and forth for twenty minutes, after which personal details of the two candidates were dragged into the discussion. For the next half an hour, until the debate ended, dirty linen was washed in public.

But CNN was not the only one to do so. The National Examiner too got into the act. It published on the front page a report with a screaming headline, “Adams Hitman Tells All.” A former close aide of the Presidential candidate was quoted in the report as saying that “Adams had a propensity of seeing conspiracies where none existed” and that he had been advised by his doctor to undergo psychiatric treatment. Of course, the report did not offer an evidence for the sensational claim.

All in all, the trend of the Presidential election had been changed.

# 45

Premier’s residence, Beijing

W

ith only eight days to go for the US Presidential election, the Chinese Premier was still no closer to achieving his goal of getting the ‘right person’ into the White House. His plans, although well-crafted and in the hands of experts, had run into unforeseen problems. Maybe he should reconcile to having an adversary as the leader of the world’s oldest democracy. Maybe he should push for a later date his strategy to make China the world’s biggest superpower.

The thought made the Premier glum. He was not used to such setbacks. But he had other, more urgent, matters to resolve. So far, both within the party and government, he had deftly encountered opposition to his leadership and emerged stronger than before. However, Bang and Lin had created internal problems in recent months, and unless he put his house in order, he would be unable to push his external agenda ahead. He took a conscious decision to tackle the trouble away from home first, and summoned Dr. Lee.

Meanwhile, Bang appeared to have been resigned to his fate and decided that he will honorably spend the remaining days of his life as a Vice Premier. This is the impression that the Premier received from his sources. Bang had been chairing meetings, demonstrating only a mild interest in the affairs. There was none of the sharp questioning that used to be his signature mark. It seemed that he had lost interest even in his fiefdom, Shanghai, and was content to bask in the luxuries of life that he had accumulated over the years.

Money was not an issue for him, and he could spend the rest of life more than comfortably. Of course, the receding possibility of Premiership would rankle, but what the hell — one could not get everything one wanted, he said to himself philosophically. By nature, he was crafty and even ruthless, but also practical. He realized that the cards were stacked against him, for now.

Although he was unaware of the plots that the Premier had hatched to fix the US Presidential elections, whispers had reached his ears that the party’s and the government’s supreme leader was up to something very ambitious. Whatever it was, Bang hoped it would fail. He did not have any love lost for the US, but he had lesser love for the Premier.

The case with Lin Liguo, however, was different. Lin continued to be a challenge. He was not giving up, unlike Bang. Once his daughter and her family had slipped out of his control and moved to the United States (of that the Premier was sure), he was lying low, plotting, and planning, as was his nature. Gaps were beginning to emerge in the surveillance timeline.

There were times when his security team, with all the home-grown 5G technology — which it was preparing to export in large numbers to nations despite the risk it posed to them — of being at its disposal, was unable to locate his whereabouts. Just when the team would prepare to escalate the search to a higher level, Lin would resurface. It was as if he was taunting them, challenging them to make the next move.

The security team had been trying hard to locate if Lin had commissioned more ‘Angel Face’ like honey traps and if so, where they were. So far, they had not been able to establish any credible leads. The search continued.

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Lin Liguo was a meticulous person. He knew that the Russians had incredible ‘poison’ technology that enabled them to kill adversaries and make it look like a natural death. To counter this, he had read up on Vishkanya, a method used in ancient India to seduce and assassinate rivals a couple of decades ago. A few years after that, he had started a Research Center in the hills of Tibet, adjoining the Indian state of Uttarakhand, where getting in to and out of India was easy.

Nestled in the hills of Tiber bordering India’s Niti village, there were three girls, who had grown up to be Vishkanyas. Vish-Kanya meaning Poisonous Girl, were prevalent for hundreds of years in India. Right from their childhood, they are fed special types of poison, which would give them special powers. Sometimes, even kissing them on the lips could lead to death.

All were in their early 20s now and were ready to be deployed. For months, Lin’s handpicked men (a group of eight) had been working in the region, winning over the trust of the locals by a generous splash of money and claiming to be well-wishers of the local population. The team had funded a local school, a monastery, and a health clinic. The Indian authorities had no inkling of the team members’ malicious designs since the latter had all documentation to prove they were social workers.

The Premier, naturally, knew nothing about these developments. He had possibly never heard of Vishkanyas. And he was getting increasingly frustrated over Lin’s success in fooling the high-tech surveillance he was put under. The Chinese supreme leader was determined to know who all Lin was meeting these days and why.

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Lin was indeed up to something. He wanted to see for himself the various Hong Kong barracks that the British had left in 1997. Some of them had been boarded up and become unusable. He was under no illusion about cleaning them up clandestinely and not having the Premier come to know of it.

Instead, he had a more workable plan. What he intended to do was to tell Americans the truth. They would have to do some work before occupying those barracks. One, Wellington Barracks, had been repurposed to be of use for civilians, but it still had the old buildings intact and could be re-converted. Located close to the Wan Chai district, right opposite the Hong Kong Cultural Centre on the Hong Kong island, it would be ideal as a command-and-control center.

Wellington Barracks was previously situated on Hong Kong Island's waterfront with Victoria Harbor, with a seawall running to the north of the barracks. In 1890, The Golden Clock was installed on top of the main building to keep time at the military base. It was this clock that gave Wellington Barracks its Chinese name, Gum Jung Ping Fong (Golden Clock). Electricity was first supplied to the Wellington Barracks in 1910.

On 7 September 1945, following the end of the Japanese occupation of Hong Kong at the end of World War II, the Royal Navy re-established their naval base, HMS Tamar at Wellington Barracks, vacated by the British Army. With the British handing over Hong Kong to the Chinese in 1997, many barracks like this one had been either lying unused or repurposed for civilian use.

As Hong Kong began to expand over the years, the barracks became problematic. They divided Central and Wan Chai since development on the site of the barracks was not permitted. It forced developers to construct commercial and residential complexes solely to the east of the barracks in Queen's Road East. The Government of Hong Kong tried to obtain the site from the military to unite the two districts but failed.

In 1959, the Hong Kong Government paid HK$24 million to the War Department for the release of the land of the Wellington Battery area. That done, some of the barracks were demolished, while other remained.

Wellington Barracks now boasted of many amenities open to those working and living within the barracks. There was a bar for the junior ranks, many games available, including horse racing and snooker tables. Masseur and mess too were available. There was a single serving personnel room with Internet access.

Elsewhere, there was an officers' mess, sergeants' mess, and a gymnasium with squash courts. The Guards Museum houses a collection of uniforms, colors and artefacts spanning over three hundred years of history of the Foot Guards.

In short, Washington Barracks in its present form, was an upscale fashion district where the rich and famous and their kin hung out. Tourist traffic was also high, which was good, because an American presence could be quietly built up without arousing suspicions.

Lin lived in the fashionable Victoria Peak district, where he owned a couple of high-rises worth millions of dollars. His residence was the colonial mansion that the British had built during the Second World War that served as the command post as it had views of the Indian Ocean and of the hundreds of islands that dotted the Hong Kong landscape.

“I must force Lin’s hand,” the Chinese Premier told himself. For now, the leverage with which to do that, did not suggest itself. It needed careful thought, but the Premier calculated that fixing Lin could wait until after the US elections.

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With Team Gallagher trailing by quite a few percentage points across the nation, the Chinese Premier was getting more nervous by the minute. Adams, if allowed to win, would for sure wreak havoc on China for the CallGate saga. Under no circumstances could he be allowed to win. Did Dr. Lee build enough of a cushion to ensure victory? Or did he have to invoke Team Three, which dealt with machinations that Dr. Lee was unaware of, with the task? Either way, he needed to find the ground situation from Lee before proceeding. which is why he had called Dr. Lee for a meeting.

# 46

Woods cleared his throat. “The Chinese Premier has a simple request for you.”

“Oh?”

“He is calling in a favor.”

“What favor did he do to me?”

“He asserts that it is because of him that you are the President.”

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P

hil Bronkowski, the FBI special agent, was meanwhile watching the Internet browsing patterns of Xi “Beijing Bob” Ming. The FBI unit of Seattle was responsible for the security of his family – six agents did eight-hour shifts, two at a time for twenty-four-hour coverage. The outings, even to the neighborhood restaurants, were planned meticulously, during hours that attracted less crowd to ensure that no information of their whereabout leaked.

He understood China’s desperation — particularly its Premier’s desperation — to find out where the kin had been hidden. He also knew that the Chinese agencies would leave no stone unturned to unearth information that could lead them to the family. Bronkowski had no desire to make things easy for Beijing.

While setting up the broadband access for the family, the FBI had concerns on the area that the access ought to be given. Should Ming be allowed to surf the web as he pleased? If so, could he be allowed to go into the Dark Web to send secret messages to his contacts?

The dark web is a World Wide Web content that exists on Dark Nets. These are networks that use the Internet but require specific software, configurations, or authorization to access. Through the dark web, private computer networks can communicate and conduct business by remaining anonymous — without divulging information such as the user's location. The dark web, which gets its name from the secrecy that shrouds it, forms a part, albeit small of the deep web. It cannot be indexed by web search engines.

These Nets can include small, friend-to-friend peer-to-peer networks, as well as large, popular networks such as Tor, Freenet, I2P, and Riffle operated by public organizations and individuals. The Dark Net can also be used by specific groups for nefarious purposes, obviously not desirable to be easily accessed by others.

Just days before Lin’s daughter’s family moved to Seattle, there was a meeting between the heads of the FBI, the CIA, Bronkowski and Sanders on how to draw boundaries around the Lin family, ensconced in Seattle.

Bronkowski said, “For the Seattle safe house, we need to establish some boundaries. Do we provide them restricted access to the Internet or …?”

Sanders intervened, “You mean, allowing them access to Dark Web?”

“Yes, among other things.”

FBI Director Edwards chipped in. “We now have technology to interpret in real-time what is being typed in foreign languages. If the conversation is coded, we can crack that too. The hardware is fast and will be able to track every mouse-click. While An, the daughter is a homemaker, Ming used to run an intel unit and would be itching to find out where Mia “Angel Face” Wang disappeared to. We will also come to know if he is in touch with his father-in-law.”

The CIA chief had reservations, “If we take the chance of allowing them access to the dark net in the hope of eavesdropping on critical conversations, we also run the risk of not being able to decipher the conversation. There is no guarantee that our people will be able to break the code.”

Bronkowski said, “It’s a risk worth taking. I am confident that our people will be able to deliver. After all, Beijing Bob is hardly likely to use the regular web for talking things or sending material over that we would be interested in.”

Sanders seconded that. “I agree. Let us take the chance. Who knows, An might get bored, and try something that can give us an important lead.”

It was decided then to take the route. The safe house in which the family kept, was in any case well secured, both in matters of communication and physical security. It housed a political asset and thus was even more secure than usual. It was a joint FBI-CIA operation and approvals for phone tapping and other forms of surveillance, including Net checks, had been received from the Department of Justice, and put in place with help of state-of-art surveillance equipment.

The safe house belonged to the family of a retired CIA senior operative who was no longer alive. The family had been well taken care of and relocated elsewhere to another state. The safe house, managed jointly by the two premier intelligence agencies of the US, had been customized to serve both offensive and defensive purposes.

On the defensive side, it was used to hide people and keep them safe from investigation, capture or surveillance. A year ago, it played host to a Syrian national who had worked for Al Qaeda but had turned hostile and was airlifted by the CIA to this place. He spent seven months there, revealing many important secrets that helped the agency crack down on the terrorist organization on Syrian soil, before he succumbed to cancer.

It doubled as an offensive safe house when the FBI was running a clandestine operation against a drug cartel three years ago. All the planning and execution was done there by a special team of officers and field agents. The FBI chose the place because it had suspected leaks from its headquarters.

The safe house had everything that was needed. It had easy access/ escape routes, clandestine transportation through air or road. Besides, it was ideal to watch from a distance and had several hiding places built in — to store, people, arms and ammunition, and surveillance equipment.

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Bronkowski knew that Xi “Beijing Bob” Ming was both furious and desperate. Furious because he was caught off guard while Mia “Angel Face” Wang disappeared. Desperate, because he was unable, despite his best efforts, in locating her. He had taken Mia’s escape in Macau personally. He, of all people, knew how valuable an asset she was to his scheme of things. And so, Xi was constantly in touch with his contacts in China and elsewhere to locate her.

He had been discreetly enquiring from his associates in the secret services in Beijing to see if they happened to know her whereabouts. So far, he had drawn a blank on all fronts, except one. One of his contacts told him that Angel Face had been taken by a submarine to Portland, with the vessel returning to mainland China.

“What more do you have on that?” Xi asked.

“Nothing more than what I have told you,” the contact replied, adding “Apparently, it could not have happened either without the approval of the higher-ups in China or by a foreign power which used stealth to take her away.”

Beijing Bob mulled over the information. Something was better than nothing, he told himself. He needed to update his father-in-law. He dialed Lin using the special software that he had installed, who heard him with complete silence, said, “Okay,” and hung up.

Lin guessed that the Premier had control over Angel Face Wang. It resulted in mixed feelings in him. He was happy that Valdez could be ‘controlled’ but upset that Angel Face was now in the Premier’s hold.

But there was nothing he could do about it for the moment. Wait till after the US elections, he said to himself.

# 47

Premier’s residence, Beijing

D

r. Lee arrived at the Premier’s residence within the hour. He looked somber. He explained to the grim-looking leader that almost a third of the US would vote using Mail-in and Absentee ballots. The role of the Electronic Voting Machines would be far less this time around.

The Premier glared at him and then looked at the ceiling. A few moments later, he shook his head slightly and said, “Thank you.” It was time for Dr. Lee to leave.

Team Three leader arrived next. With his usual military precision, he set about explaining what his team had done thus far:

“The Democrats have been working stealthily to counter what they called Republican gerrymandering for a while now…”

“What is Gerrymandering?” the Premier demanded to know.

“It is a process of drawing the boundaries of districts to favor one party over the other. For instance, in the rural parts of the US, the Republicans are strong, and they find new ways to ensure that the congressional district lines are drawn such that only Republicans can win. Both sides have been doing this since 1812.”

The Premier was not interested in the history of the word. He shook his head with impatience. In China, parties did not need to redraw state boundaries to win; there were no real parties except one in the electoral frays. And it was his. The Premier in any case scoffed at the Western style of democracy, terming it a “colossal exercise in confusion.”

Undeterred, the Team Three chief continued, “The Democrats do it too, in some states, but that alone won’t suffice. They need to do something more to ensure a Democratic win.”

“So, what else have the Democrats been up to?”

“Our Florida friend Matt Woods bankrolled a series of legislations in the states of Michigan, Nevada and Pennsylvania to relax the restrictions for voter identification. In fact, it is so loose now that it’s possible for one person to vote many times. That there is a pandemic around makes it even easier.”

The Premier asked, “I see. But will that ensure a Democratic win in these states? The polls don’t seem to suggest so.”

“Almost thirty million ballots have been mailed in. We have mixed in a fair number of fake votes such as absentee ballots, dead voters’ ballots in strategic electoral counties where it is a toss-up.”

“What else?”

“Using our friends in the various state election offices, we have decreased dramatically the requirements for mail-in-ballot verification. These were done in Arizona, Georgia, Nevada, and Wisconsin. In fact, we trucked thousands of fake voters from the outskirts of Los Angeles to Las Vegas to cast ballots in person for missing voters using fake paycheck slips for identification. Once voted, these rascals spent a night getting drunk and gambling.”

“I don’t want to know the details,” the Premier said quickly. He had no desire to get into murky elaborations. He was good enough with the bigger picture. He asked, “Are they different enough to not arouse any suspicion?”

“Yes, they are.”

“What else?”

“In some states such as Georgia and Pennsylvania, we have managed to duplicate several voter ballots. Boxes full of votes cast for Team Gallagher will be switched with the actual ones before they are counted.”

“You mean to say, there are no watermark checks?” The Premier could not believe his ears. Was it indeed so simple to switch ballots?

“Rules vary from county to county and thanks to all the research done by Team Two, we know exactly the counties to target. These are very poor, cannot afford to spend a lot of time or money in managing their voting process but once the results are certified, there is no going back.”

The Team Three leader said, “We can manage significant election irregularities without being caught — at least not till the damage has been done and difficult to be undone — in at least Georgia, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Nevada and Wisconsin.”

“What sort of irregularities?” The Premier was curious.

“They range from voter fraud, mishandling of ballots, and contestable process errors. There could be violations of, say, the Equal Protection Clause, deliberate malfunctioning of voting machines and engineered statistical anomalies.”

“Hmm,” the Premier grunted.

“We can have a ‘Stuff the Ballot Box’ strategy, whereby a party and its volunteers of our choice swamp the battleground states with enough illegal absentee and mail in ballots to turn a decisive victory, of a man not of our choice, into a narrow victory for a candidate of our liking.”

“Hmm,” the Premier grunted again.

Team Three leader, now in full flow, continued, “There can be statistical ‘receipts’ on the potential number of illegal votes cast in each battleground state. They could be votes from dead people,” he added, with a smile. “There would be ‘ghost voters’ too — voters who submit ballot papers with their votes in the names of voters who longer resided in the address provided in legal documents.”

“I like it,” the Premier and added, “What about the process fouls you mentioned earlier? What are they?”

“Sir, to put it in simple terms, we shall arrange, during vote counting, to have officials belonging to the camp of a candidate that we want to lose, away from overseeing the routing process so that the process be manipulated. This can be done by ‘confining’ the officials in some room away from the counting tables under some pretext or the other.”

The Premier was impressed. Again, he wondered to himself, was it that easy to steal an election in the most technically advanced country in the world? “I should thread this into one of my party presidium speeches to show the flaws of democracy,” he muttered, but not loud enough for the team leader to grasp.

What he said aloud was, “I understand there are a number of checks and balances in the US system of elections. Won’t the system eventually catch the manipulations?”

Team Three leader answered, “Sir, the system might. But it would be too late by then. Moreover, simply spotting a foul is not enough. It must be taken to a court and the court will have to rule on it, based on evidence. And there are so many ways by which evidence can be weakened. Court matters take long to resolve. By the time a ruling comes, we will have done what we had set out to.”

Hearing all of this, the Premier felt much better. It looked like everything was finally in place.

# 48

October 27 – Seven days to Election Day

S

enator Valdez called up his wife. “I need you by my side all days this week, Mary… Hope you can make it.” It was early morning, and she was bustling about in the house, getting the children ready for school.

“I can do that. I just need to pack my bags and organize a few things here. Where do you want me to come?”

“Houston.”

“What are you doing in Texas?” It was a pointless question. She knew that Texas was turning out to be a close race and Valdez was concentrating his energies on garnering the critical last-minute support of voters from the state. The city of Houston was a good place to manage the effort.

The city’s economy thrives on a robust industrial base in energy, manufacturing, transportation, and aeronautics. It is also home to leading healthcare sector firms and oilfield equipment. It has the second-most Fortune 500 headquarters of any American municipality within its city limits — second only to New York City. In terms of campaign funding, therefore, Houston was an important place for Presidential and Vice-Presidential candidates to pay attention to.

From Valdez’s point of view, the city was important even more because of its population mix. It has people drawn from various ethnic and religious backgrounds. Houston was the most diverse metropolitan area in Texas, and the most racially and ethnically diverse major metropolis in the US.

Valdez told his wife, “I will have someone get in touch with you to see if we can fly you out on a private plane. Time is of essence.” Valdez did not, of course, own a private jet. He did not need to. All he had to do was to call up one of his powerful friends in the corporate world and a plane would be at his disposal. He did not feel apologetic or guilty about calling in such favors; most politicians used such services. Wealthy donors came in handy with other things too. Such as arranging scholarships for wards of influential politicians or providing safe and well-equipped hideouts for those needing discretion with their extra-marital affairs.

The race for Texas Senate seat had got closer for the democratic challenger from that state and he requested Valdez to help swing the Latino-American audience in his state his way. Valdez turned on his charm on the Spanish-speaking audience and he brought the house down with his rags-to-riches story.

Soon after speaking with Valdez, Mary got things organized. She left a note for the music teacher Olga, informing her that she would be away for a few days. She instructed Olga to continue with her piano lessons for the children. She wasn’t sure when she would return, and so she left that out in the note.

Time flew. Every few hours, Valdez and Mary were in a new city and before a new audience, with Valdez delivering his speeches on various aspects of the vision of Team Gallagher. Mary would be dutifully present on those occasions, walking to the podium with Valdez, had in hand, beaming, and waving to the crowd. They seemed the perfect couple.

Valdez had to concentrate on regions that were his strongholds so as to squeeze out the maximum support on D-day. On the other hand, he had also to visit states where he was not supposed to do well, in the hope that he could contain the damage at the least or possibly swing them in his favor by some miracle.

The copywriters too were traveling with them to manage the fine-tuning of speeches, often using tele-prompters. Valdez was a good speaker, often talking without notes. But there were occasions when the tele-prompter had to be put into service, for example, when he was dealing with serious matters such as those of the economy or foreign relations. He did not want to falter or say something that would harm his prospects in the last crucial leg of the campaign.

But this dependence on technology had its fallouts. Once, while addressing an audience, the tele-prompter developed a snag in the middle of a sentence. Valdez had begun, “I can assure you all that our economic policy will take into consideration…” when the machine went blank. When it came on, it had skipped a few words. Valdez completed the sentence as the tele-prompter read, “… the needs of the Chinese.” For a moment there was stunned silence, and then laughter as the audience realized the cause of the gaffe. But his critics were quick to seize on the embarrassment, claiming that the truth was finally out!

Appearing in person became critical as Social Media platforms had ceased playing political ads/ videos a week before the elections. All the campaigning had to be done the hard way, especially in a pandemic era where social distancing was also a must.

This meant more TV interviews, more radio talks, podcasts etc. The chances of blundering are, therefore, also higher, and the time to make amends is simply not there. Valdez was learning all this the hard way.

Night after night, Valdez and Mary would be so exhausted that there was no time for any intimacy. She did not mind that; after all, once the elections were over and — hopefully, she said to herself — Valdez became Vice President, they would make up for lost time. But what did rankle her were the admiring glances that women gave him at the meetings and his flirtatious response to that. She tried to console herself with the thought that Valdez had to behave in that fashion; after all, he could not be seen to be cold to the audience.

On one of the nights, after Valdez had crashed into bed and was snoring away, Mary recalled reading an article about ‘serial spouse cheaters’. The article had listed a few ‘signs’ of a cheater. Mary subconsciously realized that a few of them fitted Valdez. In the months gone by, he would be suddenly missing for days without any credible explanation. He was often busy texting people (she had once surreptitiously glanced at his phone and caught the name of one Elise). On another occasion, when she questioned on his unaccounted-for disappearances, he had offered a lame excuse.

Mary sighed. Someday, she would confront Valdez and demand proper answers.

# 49

RNC Headquarters - Fourteen days to Election Day

J

im Harper looked stressed. The Republican National Convention (RNC) Chairman had a naturally stressed look even in the best of times, so the appearance should not have been anything but normal. In fact, his colleagues believed that the in-built stress factor made him perform better.

But now Harper looked super-stressed, which was not normal and indicated something was seriously wrong. With fourteen days to go for elections, it did not bode well, thought Bill Adams, as he viewed the man. Adams had met Harper on several occasions in the past at party events and fundraising functions and was conversant with his style and moods. But this a was different Harper he was seeing.

He asked in a soft voice, “Jim, is everything okay?” For a moment he thought it had to do with Harper’s health — the senior leader was not keeping well since recent months, probably due to an over-indulgence in alcohol.

Harper said glumly, “The party organization is in shambles.”

Barely two weeks before D-Day, this was the last thing Adams expected to hear. For a moment, he could not grasp the sentence. How was that possible, even? All these months, he and his team had been relentlessly working across the United States, spreading the party’s message, and energizing supported and party workers. Right down from the city and country committees; the precinct and ward committees; party activists; volunteers and identifiers, and up to district committees, state committees and conventions, as well as the national committee, everything had been in place.

To say that Adams was dismayed, would be an understatement. Nearly every opinion poll predicted a clear win for him, but here the RNC Chairman was singing a different song.

“I don’t understand. President never told me that there were problems!”

“I will be brutally frank with you,” Harper replied. “The President himself never rose from the ranks – in fact, he was a registered Democrat who, on a whim decided to run for the US President on a Republican ticket. Because of his charisma and track record as a successful corporate leader, he rekindled the imagination of people, which helped him arrive as the chief resident at the White House.”

“So?” Adams wondered where the RNC Chairman was leading.

“But his way of functioning was – ‘My way or the highway.’ This led to many people getting their toes stepped on and being kept in a permanent state of suspended animation.”

“I see. But you have been at the job for a few years now and the party reports to you. Surely, they should look to you for guidance, isn’t it?”

“Yes and No. For party matters, I am the go-to person. But when it comes to fundraising, it is the President alone who can draw the top dollar from the demanding, and ever reluctant, donor. Well, you know this… you were one yourself.”

Adams smiled despite the grim news. As a billionaire technocrat, he had been often pestered by parties to donate money, and he never easily parted with his money. Of course, a direct appeal from the President or a likely-to-be President was always hard to ignore.

“While the President is good at fundraising, he does not hesitate to yank the chain if he feels that a party member is not keeping his side of the bargain.”

“How so?”

“Many match-ups are people who fought one another for decades. Sometimes, they deliberately lose because of some ‘other’ considerations. It happens in politics…”

Adams completed Harper’s thoughts. “So, President would dress down a candidate for under-performance, and it does not go down well with the party.”

“Yes. There is deep dissatisfaction, and the rumblings have a way of permeating to the lower ranks. Now I am seeing that there is less enthusiasm in the party rank and file in persuading people, especially our supporters, to go and vote.”

“Made worse by the pandemic…”

“Absolutely. The pandemic does not help,” the RNC chief sighed and continued, “It appears that the discontent over President can burn you too. If his victory is considered as a fluke, you too are considered an outsider, with no experience of the workings of Washington D.C.”

Adams said, “You are saying that I might end up paying for the ‘sins’ of the President. Besides, I am not networked with the influencers in the political capital.”

“Which includes not just politicians but also bureaucrats, the media, social activists, etc.,” Harper added.

Adams remarked, “I have always believed that the President has had a no-nonsense style of functioning. He may have rubbed many people the wrong way, but his intent was essentially good.”

“Perceptions matter more,” the RNC chief retorted. “The President’s ‘perform or perish’ corporate-type diktat angered many party workers and leaders. They found him abrasive and insensitive. And now they have a chance to get back, except that they will direct their anger at you since you are the new candidate.”

It was a strange situation. Adams was personally liked and had managed a connect with the voters in the past months. But the party machinery, which does the hard yards of calling and getting the party faithful to vote, was less than enthusiastic. Personal popularity meant nothing if it did not translate into votes.

The United States of America was no different from other functional democracies in this regard. Most democracies have charismatic leaders who have the ability to draw crowds and win over their trust and admiration. But the heavy lifting is done by the party rank and file, which works at grassroots levels to ensure that their voters come out of their homes on voting day. Not just that, these workers are the ones who carry their leader’s message to every door. And, if they are not motivated enough, they can torpedo the chances of even a popular leader.

Lost in thought, Adams came out of his reverie and asked, “Why did you not tell me this before? You must have known of it for some time.”

“I had begun to get an inkling some weeks ago. But I had some digging to be done before confirming it. I did not want to raise an unnecessary alarm.”

Adams needed to give the crisis a deeper thought. He called the meeting to an end.

# 50

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here was just one thing left to do for Bill Adams at this last moment: Launch his characteristic charm offensive, this time at the party rank-and-file. And so, in all his campaign stops thereafter, he made it a point to spend half an hour after the public gathering with his workers and local leaders.

In Minnesota, for instance, he told the local party workers, “I am aware that some of you have reservations about me, not personally but as a candidate for the White House. I understand your concerns. But let me assure you that I will not go the way you fear I may. You will see a refreshing break in administration if I become the President. Now, be frank and give me your opinion.”

The ice had been broken and the workers and local leaders soon opened their hearts to him. He listened carefully, made notes, and directed his staff to address those concerns. This became his template for other states as well.

As he campaigned for the party, he kept reminding everyone of the “dangers the nation faced from a dangerous competitor.” The Blame-it-on-the-Chinese game was in full force. The problem was: it threatened to get out of hand and be overdone. The voters may have been concerned with the Chinese threat, but they were also looking for solutions to domestic issues: economic revival, employment, and an end to racial tensions.

Adams was quick to instinctively dial back the anti-China rhetoric and steer the public into the narrative of how he became successful. His story was never short of emotion, and the people never got tired of it. It was not just at public gatherings that he replayed the tale — in various radio and television interviews too, he harked back on his personal and career journey. One such mainstream television interview struck a chord with the public.

“So, Bill, you were a financial analyst in Wall Street before you decided to go across the country over to the West Coast to set up Nile Systems. What made you take such a drastic step?”

Adams smiled broadly. “I felt that I was stagnating in my career. The money was good but there were times when the pressure really got to you. I felt twice as bad when I lost the same amount of money than when I made it. That’s human nature.”

Adams warmed up to the topic. “One day, when I was shopping at a Manhattan bookstore, the lightbulb went off. Think about this – how many times do you browse the shelves before purchasing a book?”

“Uh sometimes, when I know the name of the author…” The host hedged politely.

“But what I saw, while sipping the excellent coffee that the store sold, was that most people knew exactly what they wanted, and they would walk up and ask for it. I made it a habit to visit a few stores every week and I saw the same thing play over again and again.”

The host nodded her head approvingly. This would do well on the ratings charts, she told herself.

“There was the odd occasion when a customer would ask for an obscure edition that had gone out of print or it would be a bulky volume that weighed 10 pounds. Real estate in Manhattan is prohibitively expensive and stocking rarely sold books was not good use of precious real estate. Then an idea started forming in my mind. Browser technology had just been introduced by a Silicon Valley startup and everything could be viewed graphically.”

“Hmm,” the anchor said.

“I thought, why not sell books online? This way, they can be stored at places where storage costs were cheap (New Jersey, located a few miles away from the expensive Manhattan) and shipped out. While the idea was good, the infrastructure for this was not available. For the first two decades, I ploughed everything the company made back into the company, building out the infrastructure.

“As I was doing this, I noticed that many brick and mortar companies were also looking to sell online and since I already had the infrastructure in place for the whole of US, I could rent some of it out. This became such a big deal that it is now the most profitable division in the company. And Wall Street approved.”

The host was smiling from ear-to-ear. The Secret of Success of a Presidential candidate had just played out on her show. The country saw up close the candidate and his work ethic. She gently steered around his marital discord (he was recently divorced and had to give away half of his wealth). He was terse but polite on the issue. “That was a tough emotional moment for me. But it is too personal for me to discuss on a public platform. And I am speaking for every single American when I say that a modicum of privacy, even for a person in public life, must be respected.”

The hour-long segment seemed to have inspired American voters and whoever was in doubt, made up their minds.

This Primetime special video, going viral on social media, clicked for Adams. His PR team had applied the same rules of corporate marketing to that of politics and it looked like Adams had erased the doubts of several fence-sitters. The lead between him and Gallagher had touched the upper single digits and was evident across the country.

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Dr. Lee watched the event from his apartment in Beijing and was deeply concerned. This new turn had come as a bolt from the blue. He had been getting reports of discontent among the workers of Adams’s party, and was happy. But now, it seemed as if the candidate had adroitly navigated that problem. Not only had he begun to reach out to the local leaders and mend fences but had also now increased his lead over Gallagher with the TV interview.

Would the plans he put in place fall by the wayside? Was there enough cushion? What about public perception? Gallagher had a solid base, which would turn out for him, but these were unusual times. What if there was inclement weather on voting day and it worked against him?

This may sound outlandish, but the possibility did exist. Lee had read a paper co-authored by three academics belonging to leading American universities who had claimed that bad weather had favored the Republicans and gone against the Democrats in a dozen previous Presidential elections. because it significantly impacted at least two electoral colleges.

The voters could be divided into two categories: core and periphery. The first would turn out for voting in whatever situation if they can. The second, however, less committed, would seize the slightest excuse to stay indoors. According to the research paper that Dr Lee read, the Republicans had more core voters than the Democrats. The saying went: Democrats do not vote in the rain; Republicans love the rain!

Dr Lee let out a sigh. Had it come to this? That China had to now pray for good weather on election day to achieve its agenda?

# 51

Beijing – Seven days to Election Day

T

eam Three leader’s jaw was set. One could feel the tension in the room as the Premier bore down on him.

“There is definitely a shift in momentum towards Adams. Even sitting halfway across the world, I can sense it.”

“We are doing everything we can, sir. Some of the Democratic strongholds in Wisconsin, Georgia and Michigan have additional Drop Off boxes for voters. Normally the voting percentage is 50-60. But there is a renewed push, thanks to our large donations to the party, to have near 100 percent of the Democratic voters to cast their vote. Many have drop boxes within walking distance. Since the votes are tallied state wise, this will help,” the team leader explained, hoping the Premier would applaud his efforts.

The Chinese supremo was not impressed. He snapped, “You are telling me what I want to hear. Tell me what the truth is.”

“The truth is that many have already voted. No matter how inspiring Adams’ campaign, a third of America has already voted. Those are in the bag. For the last several months, the President has been telling his faithful to vote only in person. This could go against Adams. So, in all likelihood, it is going to be a Gallagher Presidency.”

“Hmm…” the Chinese supremo was still not convinced. He waited a few moments before nodding to Team Three’s leader that he could leave. The silence hung heavily in the room as the next visitor was ushered in. Dr. Lee.

“How much of a margin did you plan?” the Premier came straight to the point.

“About 10 percent.”

“What if there is a surge for Adams on voting day?”

“It will have to be offset somewhere else…”

“Where?”

Lee paused for a few minutes as he collected his thoughts. “When Team Three printed ballots for some counties of the US, we created templates for the ballots of two counties in Georgia and two in Pennsylvania. They have not been printed yet. There is paper stock available in a New York warehouse which can be re-purposed for it. But printing ballots is illegal. We need a printer who has the equipment and will do this, of course for a fat fee.”

The Premier perked up. “If I am hearing you right, you have everything to run ballot papers that can be added into the existing pool of votes cast. But in whose name? What if they have already cast their vote?”

“These are dead people and ghost people. They have not cast their votes.”

“Dead people I understand – I hope you will manage the ghost people properly.”

The Premier knew from an earlier briefing who the ‘ghost voters’ were. These voters were the ones who requested for and submitted the names of voters who longer resided in the addresses given earlier. He had been told in that meeting that several thousand of such voters — around 40,000 across the US, with a big chunk coming from Georgia — had been arranged*.*

“We still have eight days since the US is almost 16 hours behind. One day to print the fake ballots, one day to ship them out, three to fill them out with fake names and forge the signatures, and a day to box them. A day before polling, these boxes will find their way into the counting centers where they would be kept under the tables. If the vote appears to run close or it looks like Gallagher is losing, these boxes will be taken out from under the tables and counted. Of course, we will have to create a diversion and ensure that all Republican observers are sent out of the counting room.”

“And you will find ways to divert the attention?”

“Yes, as explained before, we have ways. Compliant officials will drum up excuses. Either they will find the Republican observers do not have the proper authorization or the observers will be simply kept under lock and key in a room close by until the ghost voter ballots are counted, and the results declared.”

“Keep ballot boxes under the tables, keep observers under lock and key… Are you absolutely certain you can carry this out? I don’t have to remind you of the consequences of these plans failing” the Premier said ominously.

Lee said, “All arrangements have been made.” He showed confidence.

The Premier studied Lee closely. The man was cunning and devious if nothing else.

“So, what do you need now?”

“A printer who will keep his mouth shut and do the job. Preferably located in the US to save time and have them air dropped in 24 hours,” Dr. Lee continued.

“And?”

“Half a dozen container trucks to transport them to a central facility where the ballots can be filled, signed and then boxed correctly. Even if these are opened accidentally, it should appear like a regular ballot.”

They also needed about a hundred volunteers who would neatly write the names and sign these fake ballots for a fee. All of them would have to be paid exorbitantly and sworn to silence. Finally, the entire plan had to be executed with efficiency, without arousing suspicion.

The Premier had another question. “What if there is already a vote cast against a name, like a ghost name? Won’t the voting machine reject it?”

“That is a chance we will have to take.”

“Hmm. Be sure to detail everything in your report. When I meet President Gallagher face-to-face, I will give it to him, so he knows that he owes us one.” The Chinese leader was already assuming that, with the plans in motion, Gallagher would be the new President.

Lee was silent. He did not want to bring up the fact that he was in fact a US citizen and being forced into a criminal activity by no less than the Head of another country.

The Premier broke his thoughts. “There is one man who can help us in the execution. Matt Woods. What do you say?”

“Of course, he is the best choice. He has the resources and the ability.”

At the Chinese Premier’s behest, a secret message was sent out to Matt Woods, requesting his urgent help. Matt Woods was flipping channels as he saw the message.

Woods texted back, “I need to speak to the boss - the Premier.” After a few moments elapsed, the Premier called him on a secure software that ran on his iPhone.

“Hello, Mr. Woods,” the Chinese supremo said.

“Hello, Mr. Premier. How are things?”

“We are managing. I need your assistance on a top-secret assignment, and I know only you can carry it through,” Premier started. No harm in stroking his ego, he thought.

“Tell me.”

The Premier did not know if he should reveal everything. At the same time, Woods was sharp enough to know that he was being kept in the dark about things, and then would refuse to cooperate. The Premier decided to take the risk. He said:

“It is to do with the Presidential elections in your country.”

“Yes?”

“We need a quarter million ballots printed for the elections. They will have to be distributed to specific counties…”

“Hold on…” Woods said in alarm, “Are you planning to rig the elections?”

The Premier replied calmly, “Every election in the history of mankind has been rigged in one way or another. We would like to have a President that takes China-US relations further, to mutual benefit. We don’t want a President that takes us on the path of confrontation and in a state of near war. Do you want otherwise?”

“No, of course not. Everyone desires peace.”

“But not your candidate Adams. He has to be stopped for the greater good.”

Woods remained cautious. He asked, “What do you want from me?”

“I want you to take charge of the logistics. You have the resources, and I know you can pull this off without anything coming back to you, even if something goes wrong — which it will not.”

“Please explain.”

“Find a printer who can print a quarter million ballots in 24 hours. Then the people who can deliver it to the counties we specify — those that will be using the Digitalis machines.”

Woods was stunned. He asked, “Why can’t you find a printer in your country?”

“That can be done. However, there is little time and logistics demand that they be printed closer to where they are meant for.”

“Assuming that can be arranged, it will cost…”

“We will pay for the costs plus profit.”

Woods thought for a while and said, “Fine. What is in it for me?”

The Premier chuckled. He had made progress. He replied:

“To begin with, as a goodwill gesture, we will transfer three billion dollars to any account you specify. Once our choice takes over as President of the United States of America, your company will be given permission to start its business in China.”

“Hmm.”

“As you are aware, China is a big market, and you will have every opportunity to make it big here.”

It was too good an offer for Woods to refuse. He replied in the affirmative.

# 52

Election Day

T

he picture was more or less clear on the voting day, as far as the undecided voters were concerned. The blockbuster interview that Adams had given had done miracles for him. Neither he nor his staff had expected the overwhelmingly positive response it generated. The fence-sitters got off the fence and joined his side.

Adams had offered a new ray of hope while the country struggled to come out of the aftershocks of the pandemic. He had promised a roadmap for recovery even while shunning the temptation to over-commit. He did not project himself as a miracle-healer but one who would work determinedly to make the US great again. His words were reassuring — more importantly, they sounded sincere.

Adams had struck a chord when he, for instance, stated that “China has been doing everything it can to undermine our country’s democratic credentials, spy on us online, undercut our trade and business.” But he was careful not to sound like a rabble-rouser, adding, “We wish to have good ties with every country, including China, and hope that Beijing understands and plays by the rule book.”

Adams had particularly energized the voters within his party — voters that had been lukewarm. These people had registered themselves as Republican, but a significant number had been undecided on whether to even vote, but after Adams’ interview, they jumped in with both feet. Party identifiers normally tend to turn up in large numbers to vote. However, before the interview, many of these identifiers might have voted for the rival candidate. There had been previous instances in presidential polls that Republican voters had voted for Democratic candidates. But Adams had also been able to swing some of the independents too.

It was no small feat. Adams had swayed voters on issues as well as on factors of personal identification with them as well as the party he represented.

As polls closed on the East Coast and exit poll projections began to be aired on TV stations, it looked like Bill Adams was running away with the Presidency. He established a clear lead in some of the swing states such as Florida and Ohio and held the lead despite a late surge of support for Gallagher. Some states counted their mail-in ballots first and then the votes cast in the polling booth, but in other states the process was reverse.

As midnight approached on the East Coast, it seemed increasing likely that Adams would be the winner. But the trends started changing as the western swing states such as Arizona, Nevada, and mid-west states such as Michigan and Wisconsin started counting the mail-in ballots. By sunrise, Team Gallagher had established a razor-thin lead and was ahead in four of the six swing states, namely Arizona, Nevada, Pennsylvania, and Georgia.

It was not a coincidence that these were the states where China had implemented its plan under the overall supervision of none less than that country’s Premier. Now it seemed to be working.

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The Premier smacked his lips in satisfaction. Team Gallagher, with his help, had huffed and puffed its way past the finish line. Just as he was getting ready to confer with his protocol team on when he should be ringing up the new President-to-be, he got an urgent meeting request from Dr. Lee. In fact, Lee was waiting outside, wanting to update him on something that had happened in the night, the hand note he had sent in, said.

“Congratulations, Dr. Lee! You pulled it off! Gallagher is going to be the new President!” A rare smile escaped the lips of the Premier.

“Thank you, sir!” But there was a note of caution in Lee’s response. The Premier wondered why.

“However…” Lee tailed off.

“What is the matter, Dr. Lee?”

“Despite all our attempts, Gallagher was losing in Michigan and Arizona. We noticed it when results were being uploaded to the central servers. Luckily, we had some helpful personnel, who connected some of these Electronic Voting Machines to the Internet, and using special software, we switched the votes to make Gallagher win. The changed numbers were uploaded back to the servers and are being reflected in the results announced on the TV channels now.”

“Great thinking on your part, Dr. Lee! So why are you concerned? We got the result we wanted…”

“Er, there is a possibility that these results will be examined in a court of law. Should that happen, a trace of how the numbers got switched could be obtained forensically, and our agenda could collapse.”

“How?”

“The first set of ‘final results’ were uploaded to the state servers at around 1 AM Central Time, which is when we noticed that Gallagher was losing Michigan and Arizona. It took us two hours to get the coefficients right, to ensure a Gallagher victory. In these two hours, the data center at Centel Communications, the networking giant would have noted down the tallies.”

“So?”

“Well, when the tallies were adjusted and the new ‘final results’ were uploaded, the software team did not check to see what percentage of votes Gallagher had to poll to register a win.”

“I am confused – what exactly are you telling me?”

“Well, in the final tally, it will be seen that Gallagher polled 99.96 percent of the vote to win in certain counties.”

“That is statistically impossible! Why was this not checked?”

“Sir, there was no time. We needed to get the right numbers and in computing that, they relaxed this condition.”

“In how many counties did such things happen?”

“About half a dozen.”

“OK, that is still possible and legal though. But you seem to have another problem. What is it?”

“Er, in two counties, the percentage of votes was 102.6 percent and 103.4 percent.”

“How on earth can more than 100 percent vote?”

“You see, the software did not account for some of the fake ballots that had been pushed through the system.”

The Premier was silent for a moment. It was now a classic case of a job overdone. He usually paced about when he was thinking, and he was doing just that, as Dr. Lee watched nervously. This was serious – even a cursory glance by a forensic agency would reveal the fraud.

“OK, thanks for letting me know.”

Dr. Lee got up and hesitated. “Am I done? Can I leave now?”

“Wait for a few days and let things settle down. I will call for you.” The meeting was done.

# 53

Bill Adams Campaign HQ – 1 day after the Election

A

s the vote counting progressed through the night, Adams and Republican National Committee Chairman Jim Harper watched the trends with dismay. They saw state after state switch from Win column to Loss. The one common thread they could identify was that all those states were counting the mail-in ballots last. In some states, the State Supreme Court gave permission to mail-in ballots for an additional seven days – something that was totally unexpected. How was that possible? Was the famed judiciary of the United States compromised, they wondered, in desperation?

Feedback from the ground too had started coming in. Many party representatives complained of being kept out of the counting area in one counting center in Georgia, citing a water main break. Others complained of observing near complete votes cast in a ballot box for one candidate, Gallagher. This ran against a hundred years of voting patterns, wherein the country had been split down the middle between the Democrats and the Republicans, and only a small percentage of independents deciding the presidency.

In some states, Gallagher initially trailed by whopping margins of over two hundred thousand votes but then miraculously managed to not only close the gap but also forge ahead by smaller margins. In Georgia, he was behind by more than 300K votes but still won the state with a wafer-thin majority.

Already, many were heard talking about voter frauds. A majority of the Republicans polled by TV channels — in one opinion survey, more than 80 percent — claimed electoral fraud to steal the votes away from Adams. Interestingly, even 25 percent of Democrats who were asked the question seemed to agree; 15 percent of Independents too were of the view that the elections had been manipulated.

Soon after the results were officially out and Gallagher was considered the winner, a spate of lawsuits were filed by enraged parties in state and federal courts. A total of 50 lawsuits were filed but over time, they were all dismissed. Gallagher’s supporters said that the lawsuits had not made out any claim of fraud but only alleged smaller irregularities which too were not backed by evidence. A federal appeals court refused to bar Gallagher from being sworn in, saying it had not found any substance in the appeals.

The Chinese had done their homework well and executed it to near perfection.

The President could only shake his head in disappointment. In a matter of six months, he had brought in a rank outsider, who shared his vision for the country and who could have made a huge difference in reining in China, but the Democrats had a much bigger ground game and had prevailed. He watched from the White House the systematic shift in votes to Gallagher and the final result, when it came felt like a huge letdown. “Oh well, I did my best,” he told himself.

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Beijing - 31 days after the election

Team Three leader had been summoned by the Premier, who wore a frown. He shivered involuntary, wondering what wrong he had done. As far as he knew, every one of their diabolical methods had paid off and Gallagher had won, beating the odds.

The Premier was hopping mad. “The gall of the guy, not wanting to pick up my phone call,” he fumed. He had been trying to reach out to Edward Gallagher, the presumptive President of the US of A and the man has been ignoring him. Finally, he played the only card he had left, Matt Woods.

“Matt, how are you?”

“I am well. To what do I owe the honor of this call?”

Woods had come through, printing the fake ballots, and ensuring that they reached the right places at the right time. He was richer by USD 3 billion and was going to make a few more, doing business in China.

“I need your help.”

“Oh. Again?”

“Gallagher is not taking my calls. I need to send him a message.”

“And what message would that be?”

“That he owes his Presidency to me and my team and that he better lift the economic sanctions on his first day in office.”

“Does he know of our efforts?”

“No. I wanted this done quietly.”

“Did he ask for it?”

“No. In fact, it has been years since I met or talked with Gallagher.”

“Then why do it?”

“Because Adams would have continued from where the President left off. And we cannot have that.”

“So, you did spy on Nile Systems and their data…”

“Whether we did or not is immaterial. Do you think you will believe me if I deny it, even it was true?”

“But I am not the President-elect, Mr. Premier.”

“What is done is done. Here is what I want you to do. I need a video assurance from Gallagher that he will lift the economic sanctions on Day One of his term. Failure to do so will have consequences.”

“Such as?”

“There is proof of vote tampering lying in a Data center, in Nashville, Tennessee. Failure to assure will lead to a leak of this information and the whole country will be thrown into chaos. Americans are proud of their electoral systems; its quirks and methods and it would be a huge letdown for the populace when they come to realize how an adversary has systematically punched holes in their election system.”

Wood paused. “This is serious,” he told himself. He needed to get in front of Gallagher, sit him down and explain to him how he won.

“Assuming I do it, what is in it for me?”

“I had already promised you a lot. What do you want now?”

“You have Bitcoin mining farms. I want 200,000.”

The Premier did the math. At $10,000 per, Woods was demanding a cool 2 billion.

“100,000 and that is a good price.”

Woods thought for a second and accepted it. “Fine. I will upload it once I have the video.”

“I need this done in the next 24 hours or the deal is off.”

“OK.”

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Team Three leader was ushered in. Premier came straight to the point.

“Have you checked the feasibility of taking out the Data Servers of Centel Communications, located in Nashville, Tennessee?”

“It can be done. It would have to be a directed Electro Magnetic Pulse that can disable the hardware without damaging anything else. The hardware would just not start.”

“Electro Magnetic Pulse would be risky – we already tested this once and the US caught on in less than forty-eight hours. It was sheer luck that we escaped.”

“In that case, we will have to use a rocket missile, but that would leave traces.”

“Not if the missile is shown to have been made in the US. Then they would scramble to hide the evidence.”

“Do we have such missiles sir?” Team Three leader was impressed. He did not know that China had reverse-engineered US Rocket missiles down to their minute markings.

The Premier ignored the question. “Set it up and let me know when it is in place.”

“Er, we need an antenna by the site so the missile can get accurate coordinates – it can be done by placing an antenna on the roof of an RV.”

“Don’t give me the details. Just make it happen.”

“I want you to know that there could be loss of life.”

Premier glared at him. It said, “Yours not to ask why, yours to do or die.”

“In 48 hours, everything must be in place.”

Team Three leader left in a hurry.

# 54

Portland – Ten days after Election Day

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hil Bronkowski, the FBI Special Agent, was shuttling back and forth between Portland and Seattle, trying to keep two threads going. He guessed that Angel Face would have used a phone during her brief stay on US soil. Otherwise, co-ordination with a submarine would have been extremely difficult since the entire operation had to be done in a hush-hush manner.

Using hustle and imagination, Bronkowski extracted the name of the contact who had opened the bank account against which the bank had issued the check for the fundraiser. The next step was the residential address given in the application, an upscale neighborhood in Portland, Hillsboro.

Bronkowski was fully expecting the house to be emptied out, and it was. As he was walking around the perimeter, he chanced upon looking into the recycling cart. It was empty… almost. Stuck against the one of inside walls of the cart was what looked like a receipt. Someone left in a hurry and perhaps did not see a receipt sticking on a surface due to static. Phil extracted it carefully and perused it.

There is no perfect crime. Even the most thorough criminal will mess up once in a while. What Phil had in his hand was an all cash paid unlocked phone from the local Walmart, with the address and date of purchase. This was a good opening for the sleuth to begin with.

Five minutes later, he had the details of the phone, the SIM card used, the number assigned and most importantly, the International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) number. It was a crucial piece of information that he needed when nothing else was at hand.

Tracking with the help of IMEI number is normally useful to people who want to make sure their cell phones are safe. It can be used to track the location of a lost phone or a stolen phone. It is even possible, and there were several instances, of even retrieving a stolen phone.

The IMEI is a number unique to each cell phone in the world, much as fingerprints are unique to every individual. The IMEI number of the phone remains the same, no matter how many times the SIM card is changed. It can be usually found under the battery of the phone. One can also get the number by dialing a number available. Whenever a call is made through a mobile phone, the IMEI number of the phone gets sent to the company. This is how law enforcement authorities track a person’s lost mobile phone. Dual SIM phones have two IMEI numbers.

To track an IMEI number online, one needs an additional application or a service. iSpyCell is one such software. It is a web service that can track any phone’s IMEI number as well as the phone location online. Tracking through IMEI can be done for both Android phones and iPhones.

Since it is a web service, there is no need to install any app - one can use iSpyCell from any web browser by logging into one’s account.

Bronkowski realized that Mia “Angel Face” would have got rid of her SIM card, and perhaps the phone too. But sometimes, people can do the sillies of mistakes – like getting rid of the SIM card but not the phone. And that is exactly what Mia Wang had done. The phone had traveled back with her to China.

Using an advanced software, courtesy the National Security Agency, Phil meticulously plotted the exact pickup spot on the Pacific Coast from where Mia was picked up. A bit of searching around the place yielded the SIM card too, but not the phone. “There is a God,” he told himself, as he planned his next move. He was reasonably sure that she could be traced in China with the right tools. Susan Sanders would surely be able to locate where she was stashed.

Sanders already had her network in place in China. Once she was told that Angel Face had arrived there, she would be able to activate the sources who would locate the missing lady’s whereabouts. Until now, she was not even sure if Mia was in China.

From the IMEI number, Bronkowski found the manufacturer of the cell phone and the chipset that was in it. It was a Qualcomm Snapdragon processor. A couple of calls to Qualcomm Engineering revealed that there was indeed a way to locate the phone if it still had battery power. With this information, Bronkowski belted out an email to Susan Sanders… copying his and her boss:

Susan Sanders:

After much searching and probing, I have located the phone that Mia “Angel Face” Wang had used during her stay in Oregon. The IMEI number is 367894-12-450322-7. Using this and running the attached software, you may be able to locate this phone in China. If the phone is charged, the software will trace the GPS coordinates.

If it does not find it the first time, do it periodically – you will hit the jackpot sooner or later.

If there is anything more you need, please feel free to ask.

Special Agent Phil Bronkowski

His work was done for now; he would wait for a response.

# 55

Valdez tried his best to keep a stoic expression. Woods wanted him to paint outside the lines and that would be near impossible.

“I can’t make a promise one way or the other. I will see what I can do and let us meet again in a couple of weeks. Promise me that you will pause this caravan craziness.”

“The ball is in your court, Victor. I will pause for two weeks, but after that…”

The threat hung heavy in the air as the two finished their lunch.

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anders saw the email come in from Phil Bronkowski. She was impressed. He had gone the extra mile to get not only the IMEI number but also the software that she could use to see if Mia’s phone was still having juice. It was a month since Angel Face had used it and if the phone were tucked away in some corner of her bag, it could well have discharged.

But Susan had a ‘go-for-it’ attitude; pessimistic possibilities never stopped her from trying, and that’s how she had made a name for herself. “What have you got to lose?” she asked herself; the answer was, “Nothing.” She powered up her laptop, set up her security credentials to allow the new software to run, and then launched it.

Just about a minute later, the software came back with a ping! It was from Zhejiang province’s Shengshan Island. Once Sanders got the coordinates, she had the villa, and the address Mia Wang was staying at.

The rest was copybook CIA style of extraction. A crack team landed on the shores of the island, breached the security perimeter of the villa (it was 2 AM and dark), and before anyone could sound an alert for backup, Mia “Angel Face” Wang, in her pajamas, had been bundled off on a speedboat. Fifteen days later, she found herself in a CIA safe house in Alexandria, Virginia.

The extraction was done within hours of getting clearance from the intelligence bosses; still meticulous preparation went into it. Various considerations were factored — Mia, the subject, might not be amenable and might put up resistance; Chinese intelligence sources may get wind of the plan and shoot back, leading to a confrontation; vehicles that were being used could break down; and the local security could prevent the extraction.

Backed by the combined might of the CIA and the FBI— which normally fought tooth and nail, at times openly and on occasions behind the curtains, to protect their respective turfs — Mia’s extraction went off smoothly. The Chinese were caught off guard because they had not been expecting this move from the Americans at a time when a new government there had still to be installed. The Chinese secret service MSS had reckoned that, with a transitional government in the US, the latter’s agencies would not undertake a mission of this kind.

Ties between the CIA and the FBI are usually tense. There is history behind it. It goes back to the relationship between the two stalwarts of American intelligence — J. Edgar Hoover of the FBI and William Donovan of World War II's Office of Strategic Services (the forerunner of the CIA). Donovan had been in combat in World War I, while Hoover built the FBI. Donovan was opposed to Hoover's methods in the 1920s. President Roosevelt allowed the creation of a new intelligence agency against the wishes of Hoover and put Donovan in charge.

Donovan's new group accepted communist agents and the alliance with the Soviets, while Hoover balked at the strategy of using the communists. The CIA continued to hire known criminals and foreign agents of questionable repute. Donovan operated with a flat, non-existent hierarchy. The FBI, in contrast, focused on building legal cases to be presented to the US court system.

But now, with the two agencies working side by side, the Chinese had been outwitted by the CIA and the FBI, which had anticipated that line of thinking and struck when the enemy least expected to. The two agencies’ heads, Edwards, and Warner had met at their usual place and taken the bold call to extract Mia “Angel Face” Wang. Both had arrived at the same decision – keep her under wraps for now. Since there was still a transition government in place, no one was asking any questions.

They decided to keep it low key till the ‘right time’. The outgoing President was unlikely to take any interest in the extraction, while the incoming President would be too busy setting up his administration with the help of his transition team. None would have the time or inclination to go deep into the Mia’s matter.

Edwards opened the conversation. “You think it’s the right call we have taken, of not informing the political establishment?”

“There is no political establishment right now, not for the kind of material that we have to share,” Warner replied.

“Yeah, I suppose stuff happens all the time. In good time we can let the new President know.”

“You know what? Gallagher will be busy appeasing the Chinese. He is not going to take what we have done, with pleasure.”

“I’m sick and tired of being pushed around by the White House!” Edwards remarked, and Warner looked up with some surprise. Edwards continued, “Both our agencies have had to deal with a loss of reputation in the past. For what? For crawling when the White House asked us to bend.”

“I agree,” Warner said with a sigh, and added, “Remember Watergate? The CIA had actually done the dirty work.”

“Both the CIA and the FBI have done dirty work over the years since their inception.”

“Agreed, but Watergate was different. Our guys actually colluded with the Nixon Administration.”

“*Formerly* of the CIA…”

“Doesn’t matter. The public saw it as it being part of the CIA gene. They tried to bug the headquarters of the Democratic National Committee in the Watergate hotel complex.”

“And these fellows were called ‘plumbers’. Hah! Disgrace to the plumbing community.”

“They were caught, and a two-year drama played out on the national stage. Nixon and his team in the White House had done their bit to cover-up the burglary.”

“To be fair, the FBI too was not snow white. The Nixon White House, as we all know, used Presidential power to compel the FBI director, as well and that of the CIA, to help advance their political agendas.”

Warner said, “They were Presidential powers…”

“But we could have resisted. We could have said a flat No. But we agreed to do an illegal act.”

There was silence. Edwards and Warner sipped their wine. Then they rose to leave. They did not know how the Mia issue would play out with the new administration. But at this moment, they could not care less.

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The Head of MSS was shivering in front of the Premier as he tried to explain how they lost Mia “Angel Face” Wang. Premier had not got information about any other such “assets” of Lin Liguo and made a note to ask his off-the-books secret group to intensify the efforts to smoke out the other honey traps that Lin may have been using. It is a different matter that CCP used it officially; in fact, some of the spies worked as interns in Congressional offices. But the fact remained that Mia Wang had reached all the way to the top and with her in the US, she might be forced to cough up all her liaisons and worse, who abducted her from Macao.

Beijing Bob got pinged by his subordinate on Mia’s disappearance and the strong suspicion that the CIA may have sprinted her away to the US. He was still seeking redemption from his father-in-law and decided that sharing this information would get him some brownie points.

Lin Liguo heard him and just said, “Good.”

Xi “Beijing Bob” Ming heaved a sigh of relief. He had proved to his father-in-law that he was not worthless after all. This was a big step on the road to redemption for him, he figured.

# 56

Nashville – 32 days after Election Day

T

he guided rocket missile required an antenna precisely pointed to the target that needed to the brought down. The Centel Communications building that housed the Data centers was a highly secure multistoried construction, with multiple layers of surveillance, and it was no child’s play to hit it.

Team Three had done several detailed reconnaissance missions, and after confirmation that all the little details were in place, one of the team members, effectively in charge on the spot, called up his leader in Beijing.

“I did a recce of the building and it is in the busy downtown area. It poses several challenges. How limited will be the damage? It should not be more that 20ft by 40 ft, the area where the servers are housed. None of the other stuff should be touched.”

The leader responded, “I have been told that the missile can destroy with great precision, but it needs an antenna that can give a second set of coordinates. Two sets of coordinates are needed for the missile to triage. Is there a way you can plant a stationary object with an antenna about 30 minutes prior to the missile attack?”

“Doable but difficult. Can I weld the antenna on top of a Recreational Vehicle (RV) and let it wander around the area and be stationary about five minutes before the launch?”

“I will get back to you in an hour.”

In less than an hour, the Team Three leader returned the call. He had conferred with his superiors, effectively the Premier, and got the go-ahead. The RV would do the job. It needed to be within 20 feet of the Centel Communications building. The precise time of the missile attack was 9:05 AM on a Saturday morning, so that human loss could be minimized. The attackers did not want complications that would arise from large civilian deaths. Now, only the date of the attack was left to be decided.

A washed-up computer technician who dabbled in hot rods and RVs, was tasked the job of driving the vehicle close to the Centel Communications building entrance. The RV had the special antenna retrofitted and tested in rural Tennessee, about a hundred miles from Nashville. The instructions were clear – he was to park in front of the Centel Communications building entrance at 9 AM and walk away from there.

The Team Three leader informed the Premier during his next meeting with the boss that everything was in place. “Just say when,” he said. It would be a precise, military style attack.

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Meanwhile, Edward Gallagher was watching a Press conference on TV by Bill Adams, where the losing candidate was displaying the ‘laundry list’ of questionable tactics used in the six swing states. Breathing fire, Adams was talking to the media, but it looked like he was addressing Gallagher. The questions were sharp and pointed. “Does Senator Gallagher know of the underhanded means by which he won the election?

“If not, he must explain each and every omission by the election officials in every county where doubts have been raised. In the shroud of the pandemic, some counties have run riot. All this was to guarantee his win.”

Adams continued, “Using the pandemic and a justification, Democratic Party officials in several states — most notably Georgia, Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania, issued executive orders to unconstitutionally revise their state election statutes. Even friendly lawsuits were used for the purpose.”

Responding to media queries, he said, “I pointedly accuse Senator Gallagher and his team of indulging in voter fraud to win the election. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court has refused to entertain some of the pleas filed before it on the matter.”

A reporter raised his hand and asked, “Do you think Senator Gallagher and his team were acting alone? Or was there some collusion with a foreign country, China, for instance?

Adams measured his words. “I cannot say at this point if Senator Gallagher colluded with the Chinese in stealing the elections. But the Chinese role is definitely there.”

“You are accusing China, then?’

“Absolutely.”

He continued, “Since the respective Secretaries of State have declared it for Gallagher, it has become his responsibility to tell the nation that he won the election fair and square. To this end, he should announce the institution of a Blue-Ribbon commission that would go into all the alleged electoral lapses and come up with a comprehensive method that would make the process of election uniform and transparent, throughout America.”

As Gallagher was digesting Adams’ interview, his private cell phone rang. His quarter-billion-dollar-donor Matt Woods was on the line.

“Congratulations, Senator. A good fight and well-deserved victory.”

“Thanks Matt. You got the invite, right? You will be at my inauguration, won’t you?”

“Yes, of course. But can I meet with you today on a different matter? For about 20 minutes?”

There were a few moments of silence on the line as Gallagher asked his secretary lock in 20 minutes for a face-to-face with Woods. A slot was found between 4 and 4:20 PM.

“Does 4 PM work for you?”

“Thank you, Senator. See you soon.”

Woods looked at his watch. 10 AM. He would grab a quick lunch and board his private jet at noon to be in DC by 2:45 PM, giving some time for the vagaries of DC traffic.

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“Hi Matt,” Gallagher shook his hands warmly as they sat down, facing each other. Gallagher looked at his aides, and they quickly made their exit. Woods had discreetly turned on the body video cam and it was recording every second. Since he was the biggest donor to the party, he had not been frisked, let alone properly searched, before entering the room. In fact, a virtual red carpet had been laid out for him.

“Congratulations, Mr. President-Elect!” Woods greeted back effusively.

“What can I do for you?”

“I have come with a message.”

“Really? From whom?”

“You know that if it were not for Jones dropping out, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

Gallagher was silent. He knew that someone had ensured Jones quit at the ‘right moment’ and ensured that Jones supported him unconditionally.

“*Here it goes*,” he told himself, as he grimaced inwardly but put on a cheerful face.

“The Press, for once, came through for me.”

“*Yeah right!*” It was Woods’ turn. To grimace inwardly.

“Well, it was orchestrated by China. They had the goods on Jones and unleashed it at the right time.”

“Really? I didn’t know that.”

Woods put on his mysterious smile. Time to reel him in. “That is not all! Some of the results had to go your way on election night and someone did ensure that it happened that way.”

“Who?”

“The Premier of China.”

“How?”

“It is better you don’t know. It did not happen overnight. A lot of work was done over the past 30 months to ensure a Republican defeat.”

“This is really disturbing. Why are foreign countries meddling in our elections?”

“It is done and cannot be reversed. The fact is that you will soon take oath as President of United States of America, God bless the country! That is what matters now. We have to move forward from here on.”

Gallagher was puzzled. “We?”

Woods cleared his throat. “I mean, you. The Premier has a simple request for you.”

“And what is that?”

“It’s for you to return the favor.”

“How?”

“That you promise to lift tariffs on China on your first day of office as President.”

Gallagher was silent. Woods added, “I was told he had been trying to speak to you but had failed.”

“Oh, I was busy…”

Gallagher had still not got the intelligence briefings owing to all the dust swirling from the elections. Who knows what China was up to? They had been doing some shady stuff in South China Sea and East China Sea.

He said, “You know I cannot promise that. I still need to wrap my head around the various things going on in and around China.”

“Please reconsider it, Mr. President-elect. Otherwise, this will have consequences.”

“Are you threatening me, Matt?”

“No,” Woods sounded appropriately offended. “Just stating the reality. If some of these lawsuits go to their logical conclusion, then there is a real danger that your election might be set aside.”

“So, this is a threat. Matt, I have faced many such threats before and there is no way you can make me do or say something unless I want to. Sorry pal, but I can’t promise anything.” Gallagher looked at his watch, a signal that the meeting was over.

Woods stood up, looked for a second or two at the President-Elect and left. The CEO in him was disturbed. The meeting had not gone off well. He could not care less whether the man remained President for long or not. But Woods’ business prospects in China were now in jeopardy.

# 57

A

s Woods walked out to his waiting private jet, he looked at his watch. Too early to call. He grimaced, got into the plane, and asked for a stiff shot of whisky.

After landing at West Palm Beach airport, Woods called the Chinese Premier.

“Despite my best-efforts, Gallagher refused to commit. He is playing his cards close to his chest.”

“Hmm. And you told him of the consequences?”

“I said there would be. He didn’t seem ruffled. Is there something you are not telling me?”

The Premier was furious. He shouted back, “I will teach the US a lesson!”

Woods was alarmed. The Chinese were capable of doing anything, even the rashest thing, when angry. He pleaded, “Listen, don’t do anything that you and I will regret later.”

“I will talk to you later.” The Premier hung up abruptly. Woods shuddered.

The Premier paced the room. Should he order the operations to blow up the Centel building now? If he did not and Gallagher went ahead and ordered an inquiry, the whole cupboard of skeletons would come tumbling out, with all the material out in the open. Besides, he needed to send a message to Gallagher – listen to me or else…

His childhood training kicked in as he weighed all the ways in which this operation could fail. If it missed the target and hit something else, there would be hell to pay. But if it did, then he would be killing two birds with one stone.

Gallagher's Presidency could be tainted even before it began. He would know not to mess around with China and seek reconciliation. This way, he would always be at China’s — and the Premier’s— mercy. The other benefit was that all the incriminating material on voter manipulation would be wiped off, so that legally nothing could be traced back to Beijing. He picked up the phone and sent a message.

The Leader of Team Three got the cryptic nod on his mobile: “Tomorrow.”

The technician had been told to park the RV and move away. He followed the first instruction but not the second. He parked the RV at the right place and then settled down to eat his takeout breakfast he had purchased from Denny’s. He did not know that there was an imminent attack. He had not been told.

The missile struck the Centel Communications building as planned and also burned up the RV. This was by design. China did not want forensic evidence of the antenna and the related Electronics to be traced back to it. There was so much heat that the RV driver got fried. The RV was not registered and had been assigned to a salvage yard.

Later investigations of the yard would clue into the police that the RV was driven to the yard and was waiting to be smashed up, but there was some usable ceramic stuff that one of the employees wanted to take out and so was left standing. Someone stole it before the ceramic stuff could be retrieved.

The data that was there, had been backed up every month to tapes and was to have been stored offsite, but because of the pandemic the tapes were being transported once every two months. Which meant they were also in the same building. Very convenient. Both the primary and the secondary storage were fried in the attack. The Nashville airport was closed for six hours. Even basic telephone services such as the 911 were cut off for a few hours. Within a circle of 20 miles, even Internet connectivity was disabled.

The President was immediately informed of the missile attack. An emergency meeting was convened in the Situation Room and both CIA and FBI Chiefs said that they needed more time to find out what had really happened. As a precaution, Internet, Phone and Air services in and around Nashville had been cut.

“Let me know as soon as you have something,” the President got up, signaling the meeting was over. He needed to process a lot and it was getting more difficult with each passing day.

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It was too early to find out what exactly had happened, who had launched the missile, if it was a Stealth plane, and if it was, where did it disappear to? The guided missile, which knows how to hit a target once the coordinates are programmed, was launched approximately 300 miles away, over Atlanta by a Stealth plane flown by a Chinese pilot.

But China had done its homework. Before the missile hit Centel, the offending plane had left US air space and landed safely in Cuba, a country that was hardly likely to cooperate with the US, despite the recent thaw in relations. Since the operation was in stealth mode, the US had no idea at first on how the missile was even launched.

The Premier had planned to teach Gallagher a lesson and destroy evidence. The evidence was destroyed. Already, strong opinions had begun to be expressed in the US media about the failure of the administration and US intelligence agencies to thwart the strike. Would Gallagher buckle under the pressure, or would be display another, more resilient side, to his personality?

# 58

Nashville – 33 days after Election Day

E

dward Gallagher woke up to the persistent ringing of his land line. His wife was still in Madison Wisconsin, overseeing the packing of things that would head for DC. She was jetting back and forth, getting a feel for what she needed to set her stamp on the White House, and what was essential. With the kids already at college, it was just hers and his to worry about. Their cozy four-bedroom single family home would be maintained at Government’s expense while they took care of leading the world’s most powerful nation.

“Good morning, Ted!” President had a booming voice which felt louder as Ted felt the after-effects of a night of heavy drinking. He wanted to say, “Top of the morning to you too,” but all he could manage was “Back at you!”

“Listen, there are some developments in Nashville that you need to know about. Can you make it for the 9 AM Intel briefing?”

Gallagher looked at his watch. 7 AM. “Sure, I will be there,” he said.

“Great! Someone will be waiting for you at the gate.”

As Gallagher got off the bed, he reached for his cell and saw the messages from his Chief of Staff. His permission for Intel briefings had come through. The President was not doing him any favors.

Gallagher brushed his teeth, put on a pot of coffee, and turned the TV on. What he saw on the news channels alarmed him. How could an RV go up in smoke like that? On the face of it, it looked like the police was finding it hard to determine if there were human remains inside. An analyst was talking with a stentorian voice, explaining that “… the fact that air traffic was stopped for six hours around Nashville suggests that there is more going on than meets the eye.”

The TV host perked up. No one up until that time had suggested that there could be more in this saga than a crime like the one committed by Timothy McVeigh. The anchor said, “So you believe that the RV attack was a terror strike?”

“Yes,” the expert intoned, “Like the Oklahoma attack of April 1995, the terrorist truck bombing of the Alfred P. Murray Federal Building in Oklahoma City.”

“That was by extremists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. It killed more than 165 people.”

“Thankfully, in this case, there have been no deaths, as far as we know for the moment. That does not, however, reduce the significance of the attack.”

In the Oklahoma case, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) had activated 11 of its Urban Search and Rescue Task Forces, consisting of hundreds of rescue workers. it was the biggest terror strike on US soil until 9/11 came along. Within less than two hours of the attack, McVeigh was stopped by an Oklahoma Highway Patrolman for driving without a license plate, and also arrested for illegal weapons possession. Forensic evidence linked McVeigh and Nichols to the attack, and Nichols was subsequently arrested,

“McVeigh had been a veteran of the Gulf War and a sympathizer of the U.S. militia movement. Who the accused are in this case, we don’t know for now,” the anchor remarked.

“True,” said the expert, and added, “The common factor is that a vehicle parked outside was used for the strike.”

“What in your considered opinion could be the cause of this attack and where the finger could point at?”

“It’s too early to say what the motive was. Indeed, if we could get to the actual perpetrator, we will get the motive.”

“What should the government do now?”

“It should ask the FBI to launch a full-scale inquiry, like in the Oklahoma case. If you recall, the official FBI investigation involved 28,000 interviews and nearly four tons of evidence. The bombers were tried and sentenced to death. McVeigh was executed by lethal injection in 2001 and Nichols sentenced to life in prison.”

The anchor pointed out, “The U.S. Congress had thereafter passed the Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996, which tightened the standards for habeas corpus in the United States. It also passed a legislation that increased protection around federal buildings to deter future terrorist attacks.”

“Maybe it’s time for some similar drastic measures,” the expert rounded up.

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The President welcomed Gallagher warmly, as they sank into the luxurious sofas in the West Wing. The meeting would begin shortly in the Situation Room, but Gallagher reasoned that the President wanted to speak with him before the meeting, perhaps share some info.

“Listen, we fought a good fight and lost. You won, and congratulations for that. If only our party can learn to work as unitedly as yours…”

Gallagher smiled, as he nodded in appreciation at the left-handed compliment President had given. He wanted to sound humble in victory, so he muttered, “That’s kind of you, really.”

“Whatever you hear in the meeting, and whatever be your convictions, keep an open mind. The damage to the Centel Communications Building in Nashville, is massive. It completely decimated a section and fried the driver of the RV parked outside. We do not know the root cause and if there was an enemy’s hand in it. The spy agency chiefs will give the known unknowns and the unknown unknowns. But definite proof is still lacking. If I were a betting man, I would place my bets on China.”

The President continued, “China has deviously left territorial disputes with its neighbors, including India, ambiguous, so that it can rake up the issue whenever it suits them, and even use military power to try and dominate. The Chinese have not stuck to their previously agreed positions. China’s alignments of the Line of Actual Control with India have kept changing.”

Gallagher nodded. The President added, “India needs to be prepared, continue to build roads and improve the infrastructure along the border, to keep itself ready to deal with any contingency.

“It must also improve the military capacity of the tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command given its immense geostrategic value, as it overlooks Asia’s maritime strategic lifeline and the world’s most important global sea lane.”

The President was on a roll. “I believe India is looking to leverage the sensitivity of the Chinese to the one-China policy and other vulnerabilities like the Tibet issue and Hong Kong protests. We must encourage it in that direction as well as help it to look for options beyond the LAC.”

“Such as?”

“The South China Sea/ Indian Ocean Region maritime domain presents India with the best options. We have backed India on that issue and must continue to do so.”

“Hmm…”

“This is just one of the stories that happened over the last few months. The Chinese also brought down the power grid of Mumbai for ten hours, boasting that they could attack any place in any way. This newfound belligerence on China’s part is a sure recipe for disaster in the Asian region. Eventually, we will have to take a position. India is a friend, if not an ally in the formal sense. We have extensive trade and defense agreements with them, and many of our interests align with those of New Delhi.”

“Yes, I appreciate that,” Gallagher nodded in agreement. It would one of his chief tasks as President to take the India-US relationship forward.

“There is another instance. It’s not difficult to disrupt a nation’s power supply and create chaos — something that China is capable of. Remember how Mumbai power grid had failed. A report by one of our agencies had hinted at a cyberattack by China to cripple that country’s commercial capital.”

“Yes, I have read that report. It said that ten Indian power sector organizations, including four of the five Regional Load Dispatch Centers and two Indian seaports were targets in a campaign by a Chinese group. The group’s online activities had raised concerns of it working to support Chinese strategic objectives like geo-strategic signaling during heightened bilateral tensions etc.”

They finished their coffee in silence and began to walk towards the Situation Room. Gallagher was advised to keep an open mind, and he would try that.

# 59

T

he atmosphere in the Situation Room was tense. FBI chief Edwards cleared his throat before beginning in a somber voice. “Mr. President, we are still in the process of collecting all the data. Each lead is being pursued to its logical end. We are leaving no stone unturned and will get to the bottom of it…”

The President nodded his head and asked, “Surely you have looked at the videos that captured what happened and have some idea of what transpired?”

Edwards was cautious. “At this point, we are pursuing a theory that a missile might have been launched from somewhere over Atlanta. The missile takes about an hour to reach Nashville, and in that time the plane that launched it might have disappeared over the Atlantic, to a country like Cuba. We have some gaps in our information which is making it difficult to put together the complete picture.”

“How can a plane travel hundreds of miles and still escape detection? Don’t we have the most advanced detection systems in the world?”

“Well, the aircraft could have been in stealth mode, escaping Radar detection.”

“Then how can you say for certain there was a plane?”

“Because we detected contrails over the Atlantic Ocean…”

“Contrails?”

“Condensation trails. When a plane is traveling at supersonic speeds or even at high speeds, it can sometimes leave a trail of condensation because of the difference in temperature between the plane and the atmosphere. We confirmed from all our sources that no plane of ours was anywhere in the vicinity.”

“How soon can you put together what really happened?”

“We are trying, sir. As soon as possible.”

“Put every resource behind it. We need to find out who did it and why. Our response must be proportionate and swift. Till the last day of office, I am still the President and I want this solved. A swift and proportionate response for the perpetrator must follow, without fail.”

Gallagher, the President-elect, spoke up, “Any other theories? Was there anyone in the RV?”

“We are ascertaining that, sir,” Edwards looked at the President-elect and spoke. “We think there may have been at least one individual. The heat was so much that not much of his remains could be found.”

“Okay,” the President said. “Continue to investigate, but discreetly. The official line to be taken before the media is that this was, prima facie, a terror attack, and the FBI is inquiring into it. Some leads are there but they cannot be disclosed for obvious reasons. The FBI is working closely with all other agencies such as the CIA to unravel any foreign element in the attack.”

“And no word on China...” Gallagher intervened.

“Absolutely no word,” the President affirmed. “We will keep this close to our chest. Let us first see where the investigations lead.”

Soon after this meeting, Edwards met his CIA counterpart Warner and had an hour-long conversion with him. Together they managed to connect some dots regarding the missing plane.

“It appears that the mysterious aircraft went in the direction of Cuba and perhaps landed there,” Edwards remarked.

Warner was silent. Edwards continued, “You could use your ground level intel network in Cuba to fish.”

“Hmm,” Warner said noncommittally. He was reluctant to commit, though he knew that the plane had indeed gone to Cuba. Instead, he added, “Let me see.”

Edwards was too experienced not to know that the CIA chief was dragging his feet. Perhaps he was waiting for the political situation to stabilize first. He let it go.

Meanwhile, as he was being driven back to his office, the penny dropped for Gallagher. The attack on the data building — was that what Woods had referred to as “consequences?” in his meeting?

He had to get to the bottom of the matter. But how? He was still not the President. And he could not possibly let the President know of his conversation with Woods. How had Matt Woods taken this attack? Surely, he must have put two and two together.

With a sigh, he realized that this attack would be his first major challenge after assuming power. He did not look forward to it.

# 60

Seven days to inauguration

M

ary and Victor Valdez should have been celebrating the victory, but they never had much of an occasion for it. Each passing day brought more accusations from the rival camp of a stolen result. Even sections of the media had begun to talk and write about possible voter fraud.

People gathered in hundreds in the streets of various States, carrying placards and protesting the declared results. One of the placards read: ‘Who robbed my vote?’ Another said, ‘I reject the unconstitutionally elected government!’ And a third announced, ‘We will fight to the end.’

Some spirited citizens and public interest groups aligned to the Republican Party had challenged the results in the state and federal courts. But the courts refused to hear their lawsuits, unlike in some previous elections.

It seemed the path was clear for Valdez to be in the co-driver’s seat. He was excited, although he had been warned that Vice President’s post was ceremonial and carried little heft in the US Presidential system of government. He believed that he could, with his high profile, be able to change that.

Every so often, a new lawsuit would pop up and rekindle interest in the election fraud that had taken place. There were some surprising developments too, but by and large, thus far, nothing substantive had emerged that threatened to upset the applecart that the US democracy has become.

Strangely, even in key battleground states, where the Republicans controlled the State chambers and had been outwitted by the fraud, the losers showed no interest in investigating the various dimensions of the electoral manipulation. The Republican Governors of these states just sat tight in their mansions, passively viewing the results. It appears that they had lost the will to fight.

In the weeks leading up to the inauguration, Mary and Valdez were invited by the rich and famous across the country to come celebrate in their town. The Who’s Who were eager to demonstrate their proximity to the Second Couple of the country. Valdez was only too eager to oblige; he was enjoying this new bout of attention, and Mary was happy that she could keep a close eye on her husband.

The difference between these crisscrossing flights and those pre-election flights was the fact that they could now relax and bask in the glory of the win, while still observing the necessary precautions the pandemic had imposed on them, like for the rest of those living in the US.

He met a diverse set of people in different cities and states. In Los Angeles, the honchos of Hollywood and the real estate biggies made a beeline to greet him; in San Francisco, big names from Silicon Valley attended his thanks-giving gathering and expressed hope that their issues would be resolved by him; the crowd in Seattle was dominated by leaders of the defense industry and the so-called New Software Millionaires; Chicago had representatives from the less glamorous but critical brick and mortar companies and commodities exchange related business types; while the New York meeting bustled with Wall Street mega billionaires. At all places, the influencers were sizing up Valdez and exploring internally if they could get on the inside track with him, on what they considered a sure shot at Presidency for Valdez in eight to 12 years. These people were long-term players and planned well in advance.

Meanwhile, Mary was on another track. She invited the household help and teachers/ volunteers for a farewell/ thank you dinner in Florida, and this comprised about fifty people, in formal attire with matching masks, with Valdez in attendance. Her children were about to be parachuted into a new set of schools and friends in DC and, while they did not know what lay in store there, they were super excited. And they enjoyed the attention bestowed on them – they were, after all, the Second Kids family of the US.

As the party meandered towards the finish line, Mary and Valdez met with each employee/ staffer/ teacher and gave them a personal gift bag. In turn, they too had something for the Second Couple. In a scene reminiscent of a Victorian-era scene, they moved from one to the next, with a kind word or two, with the children in tow.

Music teacher cum Russian operative Olga carefully packed the present she had chosen for Mary – there was a handwritten appreciation note and a thumb drive in her parting present to Mary. The children got individual gifts and Victor Valdez, a tiepin that had a treble-clef note tastefully overlaid on the US flag.

It would be a further eight weeks before they settled in their new home, and by the time Mary got to open Olga’s gift, it would be 12 weeks after the inauguration.

# 61

Day 1 in office of President Gallagher

A

ll election-related lawsuits were dismissed before the Inauguration Day. Since the results were not so close as to trigger a manual recount, Adams needed the respective state legislatures to determine a major mistake and then pass resolutions to do manual counts, especially in the six highly contested states. Except for the manual recount in one specific county in Michigan, that finally flipped the result from a Gallagher win to an Adams victory, there were no other surprises. But the Democratic Party worried that similar recounts could throw up a lot more surprises.

The back rooms of the Democratic Party were busy with all three wings of the party placing stringent demands on Gallagher. The demands of the Moderates and the Liberals were reasonable and aligned along the party principles, but the so-called Progressive wing was a class apart. A group of four Congresswomen, calling themselves The Crew, would stomp their weight about, giving shrill Press conferences and acting like it was because of them that Gallagher won.

One of them ranted, “This country has become unlivable for the African Americans. The number of cases against racial discrimination are rising. Law enforcement officers seem to believe that a Black is an automatic suspect and treat them as such. You have to change this.”

This was her third rant in a month and was too much for Gallagher to digest. He called up Matt Woods and asked him to rein in the Crew. He did not want to dirty his hands with this stuff. It was bad enough that things were spiraling out of control with the pandemic. He told Woods, “This is going out of control. These Crew members have to contain their tongues.”

Woods was surprised to hear from President Gallagher. The first day at work had come and gone and nothing had happened as far as tariffs on China went. In fact, the White House spokesperson affirmed that the new government would continue the earlier policy of stiff tariffs on China. After the exchange of pleasantries (Woods had stayed away from the inauguration, citing a bad cold), the President came to the point.

“I hear you are funding the caravans that are heading up the Central American countries to the US borders.”

“Where did you hear that from, Mr. President?”

“Are you saying you are not?”

“There are so many NGOs that come seeking help. I don’t remember if I do or not. I will have to check with my team and get back to you.”

“The Progressive faction of my party is chomping at the bit, quoting your thoughts left and right, that you want open borders, open societies. A bit Utopian, don’t you think?”

Woods kept quiet. The President continued, “Look Matt, I am thankful to you for your contribution to my election campaign. I value you as a person. But isn’t it a fact that ten NGOs that have been the forefront of the caravans carrying illegal immigrants from Central America to the US, have been funded by you?”

“Who said that?”

“Come on. It’s well known in intelligence circles that the trail of money leads to your principal charity group, the Wellness Foundation.”

“Mr. President,” Woods replied, “Wellness Foundation has been doing stellar work in areas of health and education for the underprivileged sections of the society.”

“I don’t deny that. Just as you cannot deny that it has been linked to the caravans too. All part of your ‘open society’ program.”

Woods said, “I don’t deny that I stand for an inclusive society, and that I believe immigrants should not be stopped from entering the US if they have valid, humane reasons.”

“But such unchecked immigration can have devastating consequences for our own country. Look what you have done. You have reportedly provided close to fifty million dollars to these outfits to conduct what is patently illegal by US law.”

“I suggest, Mr. President, that instead of accusing me, you launch an investigation into the allegations you have made. I have made my support clear, but I have not admitted to having funded the caravans.”

With this, he ended the conversation. Phew! he remarked, I just hung up on the President of the United States!

# 62

Ten days after the inauguration

A

mysterious development happened, which took the US establishment by surprise and added another problem to the new Gallagher administration. One of the country’s citizens had disappeared… Dr Lee.

Before leaving for China, Lee had established a procedure by which wife was kept assured that he was alive. There would be a ping on an IP address that he had set up for her. She would visit the IP address and find a new Chinese fortune cookie saying. That was the code, confirming that he was alive. But now, 72 hours had elapsed and there had been no ping.

She decided to wait another 48 hours before taking any step. And when those two days came and went, she decided to contact the US Citizens Missing Abroad website. Looking up the contact number, she called the officials and reported that her husband had gone missing while on an assignment in China. When asked about the nature of the assignment, she pleaded ignorance. “They could be of some sensitive nature, which is why he never told me,” she said, adding, “Please do something. I fear for his life.”

Her request was kicked up the command chain and reached all the CIA office branches in China. Susan Sanders’s boss forwarded it to her as a matter of routine. The request was not new; officials routinely received complaints of US citizens having gone incommunicado or untraceable in the country they visit. On most occasions, the ‘missing person’ had simply lost his way, or his phone. At times, due to the time difference between the country they are in and their home state in the US, they are unable to regularly keep in touch, and when that happens, it sets off the panic button. And, on occasions, the person may have been arrested for an alleged wrongdoing or hospitalized, thus breaking off communication.

Lee’s case was different, of course. While he was a US citizen, he had gone missing in his country of origin. Since that happened to be China, his wife’s complaint was taken on a more serious note. The station chief thought it best if Susan Sanders followed it up.

“One more dead-end investigation,” sighed Sanders. She needed to find out the whereabouts of a successful Hong Kong-born Stanford professor, who disappeared somewhere in mainland China.

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Meanwhile, President Gallagher summoned the chiefs of the country’s two premier investigating agencies, the FBI and the CIA. News on the grapevine was that both were going to be changed by the new administration. Edwards and Warner feared the worst and were preparing to submit their resignation papers even before the new President had taken charge. But the transition team of Gallagher, much to their surprise, had requested them to continue, saying that Gallagher had great respect for them and would like them to continue.

Both had less than six months before they were due to retire. They had met each other only a few days of the election results coming in. They were seated in a coffee shop of a five-star hotel in DC. Warner remarked, “I don’t really feel like continuing even for the six months left in my tenure. I just want to walk away.”

Edwards observed him silently for a minute and then said, “That makes two of us. But look, have you given the idea the due consideration it deserves? An emotional response may not the best one.”

“What do you mean? I don’t believe that President Gallagher will have us complete our tenure.”

“You may be wrong there. He has too many problems on his plate, and the last thing he needs to kick up a storm by allowing his two intelligence chiefs to quit only months before they are to retire with honor.”

“But what sense is there in continuing? Clearly President does not trust us.”

“Look at the positives. Regular retirement fetches us all the fiscal benefits that are due to us. As properly retired intelligence heads, we will get offers by publishers to write tell-all books, for which we can demand and get handsome amounts.”

Warner was now warming up to the idea. “And we have so much to tell! Angel Face Wang, for example.”

“Exactly.”

Now, as they walked into the White House, they were determined to hang on for the rest of their terms. The President greeted them cordially and came straight to the point. “We live in turbulent times. I am told that China is flexing its muscles everywhere and is generally being a pest. In the interests of our nation, do you mind continuing for another year in your posts? I need some stable, experienced heads to advise me.”

The two visitors looked at him and at each other in surprise. It was one thing to remain for the remaining six months’ time of their tenure, but to be asked by the President personally to be around for a full year…!

Both responded almost at the same time. “We would be honored, Mr. President.”

Gallagher smiled. “I am going to be candid. When I see the shenanigans of some of my party members, I wonder, with friends like these, who needs enemies?”

Both were discreetly silent, waiting for the President to continue.

“In the name of fulfilling poll promises, we opened the borders to help facilitate the unification of children left behind in the US with their parents, but because of the way it was talked up, I now have a full-blown crisis, with thousands wanting at the border to cross over. The US is just not equipped to deal with such a magnitude of influx.”

Warner remarked, “There is the possibility that many undesirable elements would sneak in too.”

“You are spot on! I know for a fact that it is Matt Woods who is behind these fully paid caravans winding their way up from Central America. When I confronted him with the information, he had the gall to hang up on me.”

Warner and Edwards nodded their heads in sympathy. The Presidency was a crown of thorns.

Gallagher went on, “I am sending the Vice President to the border to tackle this crisis head on and come up with some quick solutions. There is a limit to what the good citizens of US will take. Right now, there are ten adults averaging per child, with whom they want to be reunited. And each and every one of them should go through the due process of getting in front of a judge to plead their case. Until that date comes, the US must foot the bill. Victor better come up with a workable solution without delay.”

The Directors could see that the President was beginning to rant, and waited for him to calm down, which he did as his Chief of Staff knocked on the door discreetly to signal that the time was up.

“Thanks for listening. And once again, thanks for accepting my offer. The country appreciates your service.”

# 63

West Palm Beach, Seven days later

T

he phone never stopped ringing. Valdez would get off one call and within seconds the phone would ring again. If it was not Texas, it was Arizona. Or California. The illegals were pouring in from the southern border, scaling the fence, sometimes daring natural hazards like the heat and cold of a desert and the country just watched as they were being bused to various cities across the country.

Valdez called his benefactor and chief patron, Matt Woods over for lunch. Gallagher had taken out the frustration of Woods hanging up on him, Valdez, blaming him for taking the huge grant of money from Woods, in exchange for which he was treating, of all people, the President of the country, like a doormat. Only hours ago, President had called Valdez.

“Victor, where are you?”

“Florida.”

“I’m sure you are having a good time.”

“Just going around and thanking the people for their support to us.”

“Good, good. They need to be thanked, of course.”

“Is something bothering you, Mr. President? You don’t sound cheerful.”

Gallagher sighed. “It’s the immigration issue, Victor. It has begun to turn into a major problem for our government. We have to do something.”

Valdez was at West Palm Beach, where he had set up a Command Central to try and stem the flow of illegal immigrants. He was fully aware of the gravity of the issue. He said, “I understand. We must do something.” He had been told by his intelligence team that drug cartels based in Central America, and even closer in Mexico, had been using the caravans to send their families across the borders. The idea was to keep the US border policing authorities busy while they continued with their illegal business, entering, and expanding into the US markets.

These immigrants, numbering thousands on some days, entered US soil, and then had to be kept in temporary shelters, looked after, even as their papers were examined, and background checks conducted. All of this entailed huge resources and consumption of precious time that could be used elsewhere more productively.

The President said, “Victor, that benefactor of yours, Matt Woods, is funding organizations operating those caravans. In hindsight, I think it was a wrong decision of yours to take his money. Now he expects us to cringe before him.”

“Mr. President, surely there was no way I knew then what he would turn out to be. What is to be done now?”

“What can be done is that you speak to him and drill some sense into him. When I last called him, he hung up on me, the most powerful person in the free world, in the middle of the conversation. Can you believe that?”

Valdez could believe. Woods was that kind of a person. He said, “Mr. President, I shall talk to him at the earliest.”

“Make that yesterday,” President said and ended the conversation.

Woods was not used to being called for lunch and expected to attend. But this time, he had no choice – this was, after all, the Vice President of the nation, and he was merely following through on the promise made at the time of funding — that Valdez would prevail upon Gallagher to open up the border to help the persecuted and the hungry.

As lunch was being served, Vice President Valdez steered the conversation to the illegal migrant exodus.

“Looks like you had a lively conversation with President,” Valdez remarked with a move that he hoped would put Woods on the defensive.

“You and your boss seem to forget that I have practically underwritten your whole political campaign,” Woods retorted. He said it in a soft voice, which still seemed potent.

Now, Valdez was on the defensive. “Surely, we need time to find out who the needy are – right now, it is a free for all. The facilities are overwhelmed and there is no option but to seal the borders for some time so we can get a handle on the ones who are housed in shacks.”

“That is your problem. I told you clearly that this is something that is not negotiable, when I made that sizeable donation.”

“Tell me something. Why do you think that allowing everyone in makes it OK for you? Just because you had a difficult childhood, you now want to make it easy for everyone?”

“Look who is talking! Have you forgotten that your mother came into this country carrying you in her? And now you lecture me on being choosy?”

“Don’t get me wrong,” Valdez said, almost pleading. “This is an altruistic gesture and all those that are coming deserve the best. But the system is getting overwhelmed and now I am hearing all kinds of stories. In fact, the phone does not stop ringing…” As if on cue, his phone rang. Valdez excused himself, took the call (it was Gallagher, who, upon knowing that Woods was having lunch with him, filled his ears with more invectives, urging him to stop the madness). Valdez heard the President out patiently, and in soothing words told him that he would take care of the situation.

He resumed his conversation with Woods. “Look, in principle, I am in agreement with you. There are many genuine reasons for the immigration. People are fleeing poverty, a violent and repressive political system, drug cartels etc. I understand the huge numbers too. The caravans carrying these people find safety in numbers. And they travel long distances, braving all odds and dangers. Indeed, the people have to be really desperate, and for good reason, to take such life-consuming risks.”

Valdez paused, hoping he had softened up Woods, and then continued, “But in the middle of a pandemic, if you keep running these buses from Central America and as word spreads, the whole world wants in on the action. You are creating a huge upheaval! Why can’t you pause it for a while till we get control?”

“You don’t know how it is to be poor. For the first eighteen years of my life, I have seen nothing but poverty – and I am the lucky one. For every one of me, there are thousands who are still living miserable lives, with no hope. You were lucky to have grown up in the lap of luxury.”

“The President is appealing to the heads of all the countries in Central America to try and stop this caravan from becoming a juggernaut. You can help by suspending your help network. Stop the buses and we will do the rest.”

“What is in it for me?”

“What do you want?”

“Promise me two things. I have quite a few investments locked up in Hong Kong and China, and I can’t afford our government to be acting high and mighty against Beijing. Especially since no one has proved that the pandemic virus was willfully unleashed by China.”

“Get to the point.”

“First, withdraw the tariffs on China. The world needs to unite to fight the pandemic.”

“And the second?”

“If the government continues to go down this path, ensure that the Hong Kong Dollar to the US Dollar relationship is un-disturbed.”

“But I am a mere Veep. I do not have any authority to get these things done.”

Woods paused for a few moments, look Valdez in the eye and said, “You will? If you get the opportunity?”

Valdez gulped. What was Woods hinting at?

“I don’t know enough about these things to make a promise one way or the other. I will see what I can do and let us meet again in a couple of weeks. Promise me that you will pause this caravan craziness.”

“The ball is in your court. I will pause my efforts for two weeks. After that…”

The threat hung in the air as the two finished their lunch and Woods exited. Valdez was deep in thought, and when his Chief of Staff gently knocked to announce the surprise visit of the piano teacher to his kids, Valdez mumbled a Yes.

# 64

West Palm Beach, Seventeen days after the inauguration

S

oon after Woods left, Vice President Valdez called President Gallagher. “He wants two things,” Valdez said without wasting word on formalities. He wanted to get over with it soon; the piano teacher was waiting to see him.

“And they are?” the President enquired.

“Lift tariffs on China and ensure that the US Dollar to the Hong Kong Dollar peg is maintained. In exchange for this, he is pausing the caravan traffic for two weeks.”

“What is he smoking? This is not a matter of flipping a switch… I cannot just take such far-reaching decisions at the drop of a hat. Surely he knows that!”

“What shall I tell him?”

“Let me mull it over. Give me a couple of days. I will get back to you.”

Gallagher could not in two days take a policy decision; he had taken over only days ago and was still finding his feet. He knew that his team would frown at the concessions that the Chinese wanted, and would persuade him to not buckle down. They would tell him that, doing what Beijing wanted would taint the Gallagher administration right at the beginnings of its innings, a taint that he would be hard put to wash away.

He needed to buy time to see if some way could be found to push Woods into a corner and neutralize his bargaining capacity. If his administration dug deep enough, he was certain that something incriminating could be found. Big donors to his party — to any party, for that matter — also had big issues that they prefer remained hidden from public scrutiny.

President Gallagher recalled that some years ago, a major donor to the Democratic Party had been busted by a department of the FBI that specialized in tackling white collar crimes. The term ‘white collar crime’, is said to have been coined in 1939, and includes a range of frauds committed by business and government officials. There could be deceit, concealment of critical financial information, etc. The motive is always to skirt regulations or increase profits or hide illegal gains.

One such scam could devastate not just a company or individuals associated with it, but also the common public and their families who may have trusted the company and invested their lifesavings with them. The FBI’s special agents work closely with other law enforcement and regulatory agencies such as the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Internal Revenue Service, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, and the Treasury Department’s Financial Crimes Enforcement Network, among others, targeting sophisticated, multi-layered fraud cases that harm the economy.

The President summoned his Chief of Staff and said, “This Matt Woods… I want complete and comprehensive details of his financial dealings.”

“Yes, sir,” the Chief of Staff replied.

“With special emphasis on areas where he has done what by law he ought not to have.”

The Chief of Staff nodded. He was getting the drift.

“Also, what we can do about it, and how long it would take to get the machinery moving.”

One more nod.

The President looked at his Chief of Staff and added, “In double quick time. I want the material in 24 hours.”

“Sir,” the chief of Staff began to protest, but was cut off by Gallagher.

“Surely, in all these years, the FBI’s white collar crime division must have kept a track of his dealings. He has been controversial, after all.”

“That’s true sir.”

“Then, they must be already having material on him. Maybe the FBI can look into the nexus between the immigrant caravans and the organizations that fund them.”

“Sir?”

“I am told that some of these organizations are linked to Matt. The FBI cannot be unaware of it, especially since the media has been off and on reporting on the matter.”

The President added, “Get me whatever the FBI has, by tomorrow.” He terminated the discussion.

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Far away, Valdez gestured to his Chief of Staff to usher in the piano teacher, Olga Berezin.

Olga was impressed with the hoops she was put through, just to get a five-minute audience with the Vice President of the United States.

“Hi Olga, how are you?” Valdez welcomed her warmly.

“I am fine, Mr. Vice President,” Berezin smiled sweetly. She had been briefed on how to address the VEEP properly and to not take even a second more than five minutes.

“How are you doing? How is life?”

“I am doing good, thank you. Hope Madame Vice President and the children are fine.”

“Yes, they are, and settling in nicely in their new school. They take piano lessons at school, but it is not the same as learning from you…”

Pleasantries exchanged; Valdez looked askance at Berezin. It was clear to him that she had something to discuss.

“I am going to be in DC in six weeks’ time and am hoping to meet the children, perhaps for an hour or so. Would that be possible?”

“Sure.” Valdez said something into the ear of his Chief of Staff, who nodded.

“He will take down the details of your trip and set it up. Thanks for dropping by.”

“Please convey my best wishes to the children and let Madam VP know that I loved my present.”

“Will do.”

It was Olga’s way of reminding Mary to open the present she had been given. Olga intended to bring up the topic while being face-to-face. There was no other purpose for her trip to DC. She had no way of knowing if Mary would see the present before she went there. If Mary had not still seen it, Olga intended to take a duplicate thumb drive and ask Mary to see the contents.

Mary was meanwhile busy still settling into the new premises and was not done unpacking. It had taken Valdez and her some weeks to move into Number One Observatory Circle, the official residence of the Vice President of the United States of America. The authorities in charge of renovating the residence were taking their own time, and Valdez had to do some heavy lifting to make them hasten up things. The authorities had been working at his request to make it “more livable.” That innovation included replacing the chimney liners, the sofa sets, the carpet, and virtually everything else that the previous occupant had had — this included a complete overhaul of the kitchen and the children’s rooms. Until that time, the Valdez family resided at modest but well-kept Blair House.

# 65

Beijing, Six weeks after inauguration

T

he Chinese Premier felt that the ground was slowly slipping from underneath his feet. India had given him a bloody nose on the border dispute, and this had encouraged other countries in the neighborhood to begin more forcefully asserting their claims. Countries that were meek until now had begun patrolling the South and East China Seas, to deter China from making any aggressive moves. In essence, he was being blocked from all directions.

And the pandemic still ran uncontrolled, plunging new cities into chaos. Worse, the vaccine his scientists had developed was not effective enough. Countries across the globe were ordering vaccines from India, but there were no takers for the Chinese vaccine. India’s vaccine diplomacy was in full swing. To some countries New Delhi had offered vaccines at subsidized rates, and even free of cost. This had created a groundswell of goodwill for India and furthered resentment towards China.

The Premier paced in the room, taking stock of the situation. While he had quietened one adversary, the other one appeared to be getting stronger every day. Lin Liguo had managed to smuggle out a scientist who worked at the lab from where the pandemic had broken out and talked of several irregularities, out of the country to the United States. Mia “Angel Face” Wang too had been abducted by America and Lin’s kin had escaped his clutches and managed to find asylum in the US. The Premier’s secret service team had not yet located the whereabouts of An Liguo-Ming or Angel Face.

He could use an old technique to discredit Lin — tap into friendly editors in the US and in China and persuade them to write about Lin’s treachery. But this had been tried before and failed to work. Something else needed to be done. He called up Woods, not so much to discuss Lin but to get an update on the developments in the US and Woods’ progress.

“Hello, Matt,” the Premier said, sounding as cheerful as he could.

“How are you, Mr. Premier?”

“I am fine. How did you discussion with your Vice President go?”

“I gave him the message. He wanted something in return, and I promised it halfway if he did as I suggested.”

“What did he want?”

“Nothing that impacts you or China, I can assure you. It has to do with my affairs.”

“Hmm. But I don’t see your President doing his bit about mending China-US relations.”

“Sir, I am working on Valdez on that issue. I am sure things will turn out good in the days to come.”

“It cannot be forever. I am running out of patience,” the Premier said ominously. He added, “You do understand that your prosperity in the Chinese market too is at stake.”

“I do, and I am doing by best.”

“Well, let’s hope that the best works.” The conversation ended.

The Premier did not consider it necessary to let Woods know of the trump card he held in his hands against Valdez. He would play it at the appropriate time. For now, Woods had to earn his money.

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Lin Liguo was a patient man and was biding his time, waiting to strike back at the Premier. He had shared the plans of Wellington Barracks in Hong Kong to his trusted conduit in the US and had found them to be receptive. The how and when was still being looked at. For now, he felt happy that he was in Hong Kong and not Beijing, where silencing him would have been child’s play for the Premier.

Lin was waiting to see how long the PLA would support the Premier and when it would decide that he had to go. There were already back-channel feelers for him from a couple of generals, who took a more measured outlook. One of them was presently at his residence.

Lin said, “General, how are things in Beijing?”

“Not good, sir. The Premier is feeling the heat. The person he wanted may have become the US President, but that President is showing no signs of playing ball.”

“The US policy towards Hong Kong could get more belligerent, don’t you think so?”

“That’s possible, sir.”

Lin pointed out, “The US has substantial economic and political interests in Hong Kong. There is a large community of U.S. citizens and visitors in the region. And the U.S. has consistently advocated the protection of fundamental freedoms and rights in Hong Kong.”

“That’s true.”

“You too, like me, must have noticed that many pro-democracy protesters out in the streets here have been waving US flags. They defied the ban imposed by the Hong Kong police, and also refused to heed warnings coming straight from Beijing.”

“Yes.”

“Protesters have also been chanting slogans against Beijing and asking the US to intervene in the protection of their fundamental rights.”

The General was waiting to see where the conversation would lead. Lin said, “These people want the US Congress to pass a law that would equip the US Executive powers to defend Hong Kong’s autonomy.”

Lin finally came to the point.

“My worry is: If the Premier continues with his arm-twisting tactics against the US, we could see a plunge in US businesses operating in Hong Kong. That would be disastrous for all of us.”

He let the importance sink in. The generals, like the politicians, made tidy sums off the businesses.

He continued, “I propose to have a greater role for the US here. Maybe give them some unused barracks…”

Liguo did not elaborate.

# 66

Eight weeks after inauguration

P

resident Gallagher opened the slim folder his Chief of Staff had placed on his desk, on Matt Woods. In it was a report on how Woods could be prosecuted under Title 15 of the U S Criminal Code for insider trading instead of the usual Title 18. Just a few months back a Federal Appeals Court in Manhattan had sided with the government for pursuing this course.

Smart people tried to use Title 18 to escape Insider Trading charges because they would not have taken any money or derived any personal benefit for the tip. But with this new ruling, the Chief of Staff was suggesting that Matt Woods, who had traded a market tip to a fellow parishioner (another billionaire) resulting in the said billionaire making a few tens of millions on a Government rule change that Woods was privy to. Not only would Woods go, but his source in the Government too would be prosecuted.

The caravans had resumed again, and it was time to act. The US Attorney’s Office of Southern District of New York swooped into the palatial residence of Matt Woods and placed him under arrest and flew him back to New York to face charges. Woods was flabbergasted that none of his moles in the government had any inkling of this. The arrest happened late in the afternoon on a Friday, which meant that Woods had to cool his heels in prison for the weekend before he could start making any calls.

His high-priced lawyer got him bail on the assurance that Woods would not jump and would stay in New York till the trial finished, for a sum of $10 million. As soon as he got into the car, Woods started calling the Veep, who predictably was not picking up the phone – neither was anyone at the White House. His donation currency had run its course and the problem he had nurtured had now assumed gigantic proportions and had the new administration grappling with it on a war footing 24x7.

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Bronkowski and Sanders were summoned back to DC to conduct interrogation of Mia “Angel Face” Wang. It had been a few weeks since she had come into the US and was now ready to be quizzed for all her links and other stuff that they knew she had stashed away.

The Premier read about the arrest of Matt Woods on an insider trading charge on the Wall Street Journal website. He knew the real reason and also the hidden message - “US is not for sale; thanks for your help and by the way, we are coming after you.”

“Should I act now, or should I wait?” he wondered as he paced about the room. As he weighed his options, he realized that the Generals while being effusive in their support to him, were also making a beeline for Lin Liguo. This was a worrying sign – till now, he had their unflinching support and in fact had appeased them by giving them a share of the spoils in terms of the corruption loot. Many generals were finding sinecure appointments in the boards of China’s mega corporations and were allowed to stash their ill-gotten assets in Macao and other international tax havens. And there was a steady exodus of financial institutions moving their operations from Hong Kong to Singapore. “Something must be done,” he told himself.

Lin Liguo was biding his time, waiting for the PLA Generals, who were sitting on the fence, to tilt in his favor. While he did not believe in kowtowing to them like the Premier, he treated them with respect. He rediscovered family life now that he had more time on his hands. Liguo would call An and Xi every week, talk to his granddaughter and watched with keen interest the growth of his granddaughter. He could feel the Premiership within his grasp – “be patient,” he told himself.

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Mary was devastated. Olga Berezin had just left and what she thought was a courtesy visit had turned out to be something far more sinister. She knew of Victor’s failings and thought she had put adequate safeguards to ensure that such opportunities did not arise, but the fact that the Russians were on to him made her feel helpless. How long have they been snooping? And what about the others? She knew that the Chinese and perhaps a half a dozen other countries were also aggressively collecting intel for use later. What made her sad even more was the fact that Victor Valdez was very smart; surely, he knew that this kind of activity would ultimately lead to disaster? Then what drove him to do this?

Valdez was in a funk of his own. His Chief of Staff had handed him a newspaper cutting from today’s Washington Post under the ‘Help Wanted’ section – he was to skip a specific event and stay home and allow a certain career diplomat Kenneth Maynard to meet him at his office instead. There would be a specific task for him to do. “So, the Chinese are coming,” he told himself. As he washed his face in his private rest room and looked at himself, he wondered if it were hubris or the fact that others did it so he too would? Right from the day he was born, he had been lucky and had successfully rode that luck to be one step away from becoming the most powerful man on earth. Then why this stupidity? “Why do I keep slipping?” he admonished himself. The fleeting realization did not last long. His next visitor was waiting.

It was pushing 8 PM by the time he went home. The kids were about to go to bed and came and hugged him. “I will read to you tomorrow, OK?” he whispered to his elder daughter as he tucked her into her bed. Mary would normally be around but today she was noticeably absent. As he closed the door quietly and started walking back to the drawing room, he noticed Mary for the first time today. He had left early in the morning before she had got up. He came in and changed and went straight to the kids’ bedroom.

As he tried to kiss her, Mary pushed him away. Her mouth was set, and eyes were blazing. In her hand was a thumb drive. “I had a visit from Olga Berezin today and guess what she gave me?” she shook the thumb drive in front of his nose. “Watch this, you stupid fool!” she thrust the drive in his hand and waited while Valdez connected the drive in his laptop and waited for it to start playing. He stood mesmerized as his recent fling with Wang was displayed in brilliant resolution. “Oh God! The Russians are on to me now,” he thought. He quickly stopped it and was trying to think of explanation as he turned to face Mary.

Mary delivered a stinging slap. This was the first time she had done that. Valdez was too stunned to react as he saw tears flow down Mary’s cheeks. Words that came easily to him, deserted him at this critical moment. As he stood in front of Mary rubbing his cheeks to reduce the sting, his Chief of Staff knocked on the door gently.

“Mr. Vice President, the President has been shot!”

*To be continued in Book 2 of the Pax Americana series…*