**Chapter Nine: Talk Show**

**Year 1991, Washington DC, United States of America**

**Dr. Jonathan Thorn, PhD**

“Dr. Thorn. Dr. Thorn, can you hear me? Dr. Thorn, we are about to go on air. Please wake up.” The reporter lightly shook my arm which abruptly woke me up from the rather strange dream I was having. The few pieces of the odd nightmare that I could remember contained a world bathed in the fires of hell itself, a sky covered in the hauntingly beautiful lights of heaven, and the face of a woman I was sure I had never seen before, but whose exquisitely defined good looks seemed to etch itself deeply into my psyche.

All in all, it was the kind of crazy dream a person has when they have taken drugs or eaten something disagreeable, and since I don’t remember dropping any acid, it was more likely that the culprit something I had eaten. That thought had barely appeared in my head when, right on cue, my stomach started to feel a bit queasy. I gently patted my growling stomach and attempted to dissuade it from continuing to do battle with the piece of chicken that I had consumed earlier. My stomach seemed to acquiesce to my soothing ministrations because it stopped its titanic battle with the foul fowl and quietly settled down.

I looked up from my formerly angry stomach and made eye contact with the reporter who was now looking at me with a worried expression. “Are you alright Dr. Thorn? Do you need anything? Maybe a glass of water?”

I waved my hands dismissively and replied, “I’m fine. I just nodded off a little.”

The man sitting next to me chuckled and said, “I know what you mean, I’m also having trouble staying awake. They have had us cooped up in here for over an hour, and the heat is killing me.” The man mimed wiping his brow and started fanning himself with a piece of paper.

The reporter immediately stood up like he had received an electric shock to his butt and started to apologize profusely. “I’m so sorry General. There were some difficulties with the filming equipment, but we are doing our best to get it fixed as quickly as possible.”

I knew that finding mirth at the misfortune of others is in poor taste, but I couldn’t stop myself from chortling when I saw the poor guy jump around like a circus monkey performing for an audience. I found his lack of spine somewhat contemptible, but I could understand his panic. The man sitting next to me was retired General Rex Thurman, or as he was known back in the army, “T-Rex”, and that nickname should tell you everything you would need to know about his temperament. This aging septuagenarian might have left the army, but he maintained his ferocious reputation as a vicious rabid dog in his current role as a top military advisor to President Reagan. It was understandable that the reporter was soiling his pants in terror, afraid that the General would do or say something that would end his career, and judging by the cold merciless glint in the General’s eyes, he had every right to be worried.

Luckily for the hapless reporter, he was saved by one of his colleagues who entered the room at that exact moment to tell us that everything was ready and that we could start with the show. The reporter, who was obviously relieved by the timely reprieve, led us into the studio where the show was going to be filmed. The set for the show was a simple room with three walls; the not-so-proverbial fourth wall was left open for the cameras.

I took my designated seat on the mustard yellow leather couch alongside the General, and the reporter took his place behind his desk. He faced us with a nervous expression and pretended to shuffle his notes as he desperately avoided making eye contact with the General.

“Before we start, there is something very important I should warn you about. This interview was scheduled in such a hurry because one of our other shows had to cancel due to unforeseen circumstances, and we needed something to fill the empty spot. Since it was a last minute cancelation, we were forced to film this show almost live. Most of our live shows actually have an hour delay so that we can do some last minute editing, but due to the delay caused by the technical difficulties we just had, we are going to be broadcasting this interview live, truly live. What I am trying to say is that you should be careful what you say because you cannot take it back once it has been broadcast.” The reporter kept glancing at the General, and I could guess who the warning was really for. The General has been known to say some pretty inflammatory things in the past and I could just imagine what would happen if he went on one of his signature rants live on TV.

For his part, the General looked completely unconcerned as he splendidly ignored the not so subtle glances being thrown his way. He seemed supremely uninterested by the warning that was being given by the reporter.

The awkward silence that ensued was eventually broken by the cameraman giving us the cue that we were about to begin. The reporter proved that he was a professional as his nervous expression evaporated to be replaced by a confident smile that was the very epitome of calm and poise. “Ladies and gentlemen, viewers across the nation, I am sorry to say that the regularly scheduled program has been canceled. We apologize for the inconvenience, but we have something that we hope you will enjoy just as much as the canceler program, if not more. For the past two decades, the world has been gripped in the midst of an ideological, philosophical, and sometimes even military struggle between the west which advocates the principles of freedom, democracy, and free economy and the east which stands for authoritarianism and socialism. Joining me today are two experts that will help shed some light on this situation, and help us gain an in-depth understanding of the cold war. On the right end of the couch is retired General and military advisor to the president, Rex Thurman. He has graciously agreed to come here in order to tell us more about the military aspects of this cold war. To his left is Dr. Jonathan Thorne, an expert in the fields of economics and psychology. He has a dual doctorate on these two subjects and as such, I can’t think of anybody better qualified to talk about the socio-economic side of the cold war. First of all, I would like to welcome the two of you esteemed gentlemen to the show. I would also like to thank you for accepting our invitation and for taking time out of what I am sure is your very busy schedules in order to be with us here today.”

I tried to mimic the reporter’s friendly smile as I replied as amicably as possible, “Thank you for having me. I have always been a big fan of your show. I am honored that I was invited.”

The General also smiled, although his so called “smile” made him look like a bear snarling in annoyance. “I am glad to be here so that I can share my experience with your audience. I hope I can impress upon them exactly how wicked and evil those soviet scums really are.”

I could see the reporter flinch as all his hopes of a semi-civilized conversation went out the window. It was common knowledge that western media peddled propaganda that heavily demonized all soviet nations and painted America and its allies as virtuous, saintly, sometimes even messianic, but there was a thin line between demonizing the soviets and outright attacking them on public TV by calling them scum. The situation had become even more complicated because of the current leader of the USSR, Mikhail Gorbachev, who has been actively pursuing peace with the US, so western media has been trying to remain civil in their narrative when speaking about the east, even when they attacked soviet values and philosophies. Now the reporter found himself in an awkward situation. He could either agree with the General and risk antagonizing the USSR which might create some sort of diplomatic incident, or he could disagree with the General and risk antagonizing the rabid dog in front of him. His eyes swiveled around in panic as if he was trying to find a way to escape and his breathing started to turn a little ragged. Finally, his solution was to pretend like nothing happened. He cleared his throat and abruptly turned towards me. “Dr. Thorne, a lot of people have speculated that the reason for the tensions between the two super powers, America and the USSR, is due to differences in ideology and one of the main differences between the two nations lies in the economic systems that they follow. America follows a free market system while the USSR follows a much more restricted socialist system. Can you please explain to us what these two systems really mean? What is socialism? What is capitalism and free market economy? What are their strengths and flaws?”

I was a little surprised when he suddenly turned the conversation towards me, but I was willing to cooperate with his transparent effort to dodge his impending doom. “Before I begin to explain the definition of these two terms, I would like to point out that they are not simply economic systems. Socialism and Capitalism go beyond the realm of economics and affect almost every aspect of our daily lives. They have become deeply ingrained into our society and have become a part of our collective psyche.”

“What do you mean by that? Can you elaborate?”

“What I am trying to say is that these two systems have become a part of our respective national identities. Capitalism has become as much of an integral part of being an American as socialism has become for being a Soviet. When we talk about the clash between socialism and capitalism, we must simultaneously consider these two nations who are concurrently trying to shape the world in their image. Even if we ignore these rather obvious implications, when you asked me to talk about capitalism and socialism, you are asking me to describe two concepts that are incredibly complex and have multiple connotations attached to them. I will try to do my best to answer your question, but I doubt there is anybody on earth who can give you an unbiased, complete, and completely accurate answer.”

Before I could continue my explanation, I was interrupted by the General who enthusiastically shouted, “I wholly agree with what the good doctor is saying. I don’t know much about these so called economic systems and what-nots, but I do know about these god damn commies. They are evil sons of bitches who kill innocent people just because they wouldn’t do what they say. They are crazy tyrants hell bent on destroying anything that doesn’t resemble themselves, ideologically speaking. Nothing good can come out of following these commie doctrines, so this so called “socialism” must be just as foul as the minds and mouths from which it originates. Evil begets evil.”

The reporter had a violent physical reaction as the General spoke. His body recoiled every time a word left the General’s mouth. His mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, but he appeared to be unable to make a single sound. His face slowly started to turn an ugly shade of purple, and in the end, he ended up looking like he was having some sort of seizure. Finally, I decided to intervene before the reporter’s head exploded from the pressure he was under.

“That is not what I meant. In fact, the General has just demonstrated one of the main problems that arise when discussing capitalism and socialism. There is a deep stigma attached to the philosophy of socialism simply because it originates from and is championed by people that we perceive as our enemies. Nowadays people are thinking in terms of us versus them, so it becomes difficult to analyze these topics without bias, and that is what I was trying to convey with my earlier remarks. Now, let me try to systematically dissect the two concepts of socialism and capitalism, fist as economic systems then as all-encompassing philosophies. I will try to accomplish this while being as objective as possible without falling into the pitfalls of any stereotypes, and I hope you will listen with the same mentality. Since it is the one that is closer to home, let us start off with capitalism. What is capitalism? I will not give you the party line that most economists and teachers will give you when asked that question. Instead, I will try to describe what makes it different from other economic systems. All economic systems are dependent on money and capital, but as its name implies, capitalism is almost completely reliant on capital. Everything is almost exclusively decided by the flow of money. What does this mean? Most economists will tell you that this means that there is more freedom because there are no external restrictions being imposed by the government or other sources. They will tell you that it is a fair system because it allows people who work harder to earn more money. Those are the main selling points of capitalism; freedom and fairness, but is capitalism truly the free and fair system that it is presented to be? The so called “freedom” of capitalism becomes nothing more than a joke when you realize that most of our country’s wealth rests in the hands of very few people; the ‘super-rich’ have monopolized a majority of our nation’s wealth. What does this mean in a system where money translates directly to power? It means that these few elite people have an inordinate amount of power and influence. They are able to manipulate the system in such a way that they can gain even more money and correspondingly, more power. It turns into a vicious cycle that allows these rich and influential people to have a stranglehold over our society. As for the so called “fairness” of capitalism, that all depends on how you define the word fair. Is it fair that there are poor people living in poverty and starvation in the same country where the rich spend millions on their cars, yachts, horse races, golf tournaments and other such frivolous and pointless activities? Is it fair that the richest people are getting richer while the amount they contribute to our society isn’t proportionally high? Is it fair that the majority of the people in a democracy work incredibly hard only to have the majority of the wealth being generated by their hard work fly directly into the pockets of very few people?”

By the time I was finished, I was a little breathless because of the intensity and emotion I had spoken with. The General who was sitting next to me was also breathing heavily, but for a completely different set of reasons; he was literally fuming with rage. I could have sworn I saw smoke blowing out of his nostrils and billowing out of his ears. He looked like an angry bull that was about to charge, and he was directing his bloodshot eyes and metaphorical horns directly towards me. “Think very carefully about what you say next, Doctor. You are starting to sound dangerously close to a commie.” He spit out the word ‘Doctor’ like a curse word and his last statement had the unmistakably sharp edges of a threat.

The reporter, whose complexion had recovered from the unhealthy purple color that it was just a few minutes ago, started to turn pale as he heard what I was saying, but he quickly decided that this was a good opportunity for him to denounce me and score some points with the General at the same time. “Doctor Thorne, are you saying that the current economic system, the one which is being used by the most successful and richest country on earth, is somehow deficient? Are you suggesting that socialism would be a better alternative for our nation? On another note, do you perhaps have any connections or affiliations with the communist party?”

I wasn’t surprised the two had suddenly teamed up to attack me. General Thurman was a well-known soviet hating nationalist and the reporter was part of a media that had become little more than a mouthpiece of the government whose aim was to spread propaganda. No, what really surprised me wasn’t what they were saying but what was coming out of my own mouth. I had initially planned to say a few bad things about capitalism to appear fair before heaping praises on it as the obviously superior economic system. In fact, I had been given a general outline on what I should say by the producer of the show, and I had agreed to follow that guideline before I had appeared on the show, but something had gone awry as I continued to speak. It was as if a shadow had appeared in my mind. Something that was dark and alien leapt out from behind a door that I didn’t even know existed inside of me and started to infect my heart with unimaginable anger and hate. As I spoke, there had been an invisible struggle inside of me, a struggle for dominance. I was slowly losing control to the shadow, and my words continued to get more and more poisonous. What General Thurman and the reporter didn’t know was that the transformation wasn’t complete. The darkness was still spreading. The poison filling my heart was only increasing. Their attack destroyed what little control I had left, and the poison came rushing out of my mouth like water escaping after a broken dam.

“I did not major in politics and it has been a while since I have taken freshman civics, so can you help me refresh my memory? What kind of government suppresses a certain idea that it thinks might be dangerous to its hold on power, all the while ignoring any possible benefits it might have to the general populace? What kind of government immediately accuses anyone that disagrees with them of being part of a terrorist organization and somehow manages to silence them, one way or another? I’m sorry General Thurman, I forgot that you weren’t very knowledgeable about such things. With the way you speak and act, I’m surprised that you know which end of a gun to point at an enemy, let alone have enough intelligence to speak about political systems. Since you are obviously a lost cause, let me turn to our esteemed reporter. Maybe you can answer my questions. What kind of government assures it people that they have a free and unbiased media when, in fact, all the outlets are saying the exact same thing? What kind of government has an ‘independent’ media that trumpets the government’s propaganda without question? Does this sound like a democratic system? Why does it sound more like some sort of autocratic system?”

As I spoke, I could see the General continue to get redder and the reporter continued to get paler. I was going to continue venting the sudden rage that had invaded my heart when I noticed a man come running into the room. He quickly approached the cameraman and quickly signaled for him to stop recording. I looked straight into this man’s eyes and said,” And here come our overlords. They are going to shut us down because we have expressed views that they can’t allow you to hear. I believe that this is what they call censorship, a word that is tantamount to blasphemy in a truly democratic country with a truly free press, but it is a staple diet of dictatorships around the world. Go on then, shut it down, and know that by doing so, you will be proving my point. I dare you to cut me off and create a live media incident. See if that makes it better.” I continued to look into his eyes as I spoke, and I could almost see the gears turning inside his head. In the end, he realized there was no easy way out of this situation. He was riding on a tiger’s back; all he could do was see it through to the end. He reluctantly broke eye contact with me and looked down at the floor, a clear sign of defeat. I smiled as he backed away from the cameraman with a hunched back and slumped shoulders. If he was a dog, he would have had his tail tucked between his legs. I could feel my smile broaden as that image filled my head, but my good mood was short-lived as it was shattered by the reporter who stuttered, “Dr. Thorne, we are a respectable media outlet. We would never allow censorship. Please don’t overreact or make unfounded accusations that might tarnish our image.”

My attention was automatically drawn to the poor fool. His hands, which were holding his notes, were shaking like a leaf, and I could see beads of sweat on his forehead. I was impressed that he could scrape up enough courage to actually speak when he was noticeably close to having a nervous breakdown. The miserable bastard was pretending to look intently at his notes, desperately trying to avoid my gaze. He might have been looking at his notes like they held all the secrets of the universe, but he still reacted violently when he felt my gaze on him. He visibly shrunk into his seat. It looked like he was trying to burrow inside of it, like he thought that he could escape through the chair if he tried hard enough.

I didn’t find the situation particularly amusing, nor did it stir up any sympathy inside my heart. If anything, his cowardice only made me angrier, and that was obvious from my response which was laced with rage and sarcasm. “Really? Are you really going to sit there and accuse me of tarnishing your station’s image when it hasn’t even been two minutes since you levied baseless malicious accusations against me claiming that I was connected to a terrorist group? Are you honestly going to pretend that this show was not a hair breadth away from being taken off air before your producer realized that the consequences would be worse if he had done so? Have you truly sunk to the level where you have become immoral and shameless enough to lie to my face, to your viewers’ faces?”

The poor bastard was completely cowed by my outburst and couldn’t respond to any of my accusations. He just shrunk further into himself like a turtle retreating into its shell. Unfortunately for him, he didn’t have a shell so he just ended up looking sad and pathetic. Seeing him in such a miserable state somewhat sated the thirst for retaliation that his earlier comments had kindled inside me. The darkness that had invaded my heart paused for a moment, the waves of rage that were rocking my heart calmed down for a second, and I used that opportunity to regain a sliver of control. It wasn’t much, but I tried to use that tiny sliver to steer the conversation away from the minefield of politics and back in to the slightly less scary and more familiar waters of economics.

“Although what you said was distasteful and despicable on many levels, you did have one good point. I did overreact to your previous provocation and in my anger, got a little carried away for a second. I am not here to talk about how our precious democracy resembles a dictatorship with two ‘opposing’ parties pantomiming a theatrical struggle while keeping the status quo. I am not here to talk about how two parties have marginalized and suppressed any politician that refuses to join them, or how they have obviously rigged the electoral process so that they have a stranglehold on power. No, I will not talk about the obvious flaws in our political system because today I am here to talk about economic systems.”

I was going to continue when I was interrupted by General Thurman who decided that now was a good time to snap out of the angry trance he had been in. The old man wasn’t looking very good. He was so mad that he was beyond the point where such pedestrian sayings such as “red like an overripe tomato” were enough to describe the state he was in. He was so agitated that he was actually radiating the color red. To make matters worse, the old man was riddled with thick bulging veins that were throbbing dangerously. Until this moment, he had been quietly fuming next to me, radiating and pulsating like Satan’s version of Christmas lights. He was a ticking time bomb, and at that moment, his timer reached zero.

“You ungrateful little son of a bitch! How dare you disrespect me? I was overseas fighting to protect your rights and interests when you were still a baby crapping in your diapers. This is why I hate so called intellectuals like you. You just sit there and blabber about things you have only read in books when you don’t know a single thing about the real world. You smugly insult our democracy while ignoring all the sacrifices that the brave men and women of our army have to pay in order for you to even be here. Not only that but you also belittle the heritage that was handed down to us. What you are doing is tantamount to spitting on the graves of our forefathers. You know what? Sometimes I envy the soviets and the fact that they have the ability to throw annoying noisy insects like you into prison. I think a little bit of jail time would help you appreciate all the rights and freedoms that you currently enjoy.”

I don’t know what he was expecting after his impassioned speech, but I doubt it was what I did next which was to get up off the couch to give him the most patronizing slow clap I could manage. “Bravo General. Bravo. That was a performance worthy of numerous accolades and awards. I bet you win a lot of arguments using that army veteran shtick. Unfortunately for you, I have a bit of a curious streak so when I found out that I was appearing on this show beside the great General Thurman, I just had to find out everything I could about you. I must admit that it was a bit difficult to unearth anything about your military history. Nobody seems to know a damn thing about you. If I didn’t know any better, I would have thought that you sprung up from the ground about thirty five years ago. In the end, it was an old family friend that dug up your deeply buried past. The things I found in your file were quite fascinating. I think everybody will be interested to know that the great General Thurman has seen exactly the same amount of combat as I have, that is to say none at all. He is an over glorified pencil pusher who has ridden a desk to the position he has today. He was carefully assigned to a series of cushy desk jobs courtesy of his father who was also a General. For those of you at home who have lost count, that is one count of censorship uncovered at a major news network and one count of nepotism uncovered at the very heart of the United States government in the space of five minutes. Personally, I think that the most hilarious part of all this mess is that the infamous fire-breathing “T-Rex” has never done battle with anything tougher than a paper-clip. His most ghastly war injuries are paper cuts and getting pricked by the pins on his medals when he puts them on. This man is a fraud that pretends to be a great war-hero when all he has ever done in his life is to bluster and send the real brave men and women of our army to their deaths with his insane wars. Tell me General, from the two of us, who is the real traitor to the nation? Who deserves to be put into prison?”

The General didn’t even try to deny what I was saying. He just deflated like a leaky balloon. All his fierceness seemed to vanish into thin air as the blood drained from his face and he ended up looking eerily similar to the reporter. I decided to ignore the sickly looking duo and continued with my lecture.

“Now that the honored reporter with the obvious leash around his neck and the venerated General of paperclips are going to behave themselves, let me return to the point I was trying to make before I was interrupted by this nonsense. I think I have finished talking about the basic principles of capitalism, so I think it is about time for me to say some things about socialism. The thing that never fails to amaze me is the fact that people as practical as the Russians came up with a system as naïve as socialism. Sure, it sounds like a wonderful system, at least theoretically. Let us all work hard for the common interest of society and benefit equally without any feeling of bitterness or spite. While we are at it, why don’t we all just hold hands, sing ‘kum ba yah’, and live happily ever after in the paradise we have created? The problem is that this is not some fairytale. This is real life filled with real people who are infinitely more complex and troublesome than fairytale characters. The Soviets thought that they could curtail all of these unnecessary complexities by enforcing the rules with an iron fist. The problem is that an iron fist isn’t very conducive to a harmonious society. Furthermore, the people wielding the iron fist become susceptible to corruptions themselves. It becomes a classic case of ‘who watches the watchmen?’.” At this point, I took a bit of a breather and checked to see if the General and the reporter were showing any signs of acting up. Seeing that they weren’t, I continued with my lecture. “To really understand what capitalism and socialism truly are, we must depart from the world of economics and delve into their psychological aspects. Most of you are probably wondering why the true meaning of economic systems is found in the field of psychology. The answer to that lies in the fact that the true objective of an economic system is not managing money, it is managing people. Although it is not immediately apparent, the purpose of an economic system is to balance the personal interests of an individual inside of a society with the amount that that individual would have to sacrifice for the good of that society. Socialism and capitalism are two classic examples of this. Socialism ignores the individual’s self-interest in order to maximize the amount he or she contributes to society. It is based on the idea that the individual will get enough fulfillment from the growth and enrichment he gets as part of society, regardless of how much that person has contributed. Capitalism is the exact opposite; it almost completely disregards the interest of the society in favor of the individual’s personal interest. The entire system is based on the idea that the whole community will be enriched if enough members of that community prosper. This is all probably meaningless mumbo jumbo to most of you so let me simplify it a little. It all boils down to one thing: greed. Capitalism seeks to harness the greed that people have for money and advancement, and use that greed to do constructive things. Although this might seem harmless and clever in the short term, in the long run, it will fan the flames of greed inside of people’s hearts. As time goes on, this greed will fester and people will become obsessed with the singular purpose of chasing money. Society will slowly rot away before our eyes and eventually fall apart. If you look closely, you can see the signs of rot appearing right now. We can see it in our culture, poisoning the minds of our children. We can see it in our politics, filling it with corruption. We can see it in our media, filling it with lies. We can see it in our daily lives, pitting brother against brother and spreading this harmful ‘dog eat dog’ mentality. Socialism is no better than capitalism. It seeks to extinguish the flames of greed in our hearts, but we are normal human beings, not saints. We might not like it, but greed is a basic part of our psyche, of who we are. We can’t just simply crack open our skulls and surgically remove it from our brains. It is impossible to make human beings something that they are not, so this system was doomed to fail from the start. At this point, you have probably figured out that I am not a supporter of capitalism or socialism. If I am not a supporter of socialism or capitalism, then what do I support? Economic systems are not divided into two. Despite what most people would want you to believe, the choice of economic systems has never been a binary one. You can take elements that you like from capitalism and supplement them with the more palatable parts of socialism to make a hybrid system that doesn’t have all of the gaping flaws from the two, and the best part of this approach is that every country could follow a system that is tailor made for it instead of one that is being forced upon it. This nonsensical confrontation between the east and the west can finally end, and we can focus our attention on something more constructive.”

I finished my little speech and turned to the reporter so that he could take over, but the poor sap still looked like he was too shell shocked to continue the show. Since I didn’t really have a choice, I decided to end the show myself.

“I have finished what I have to say for today and our dear reporter appears to have nothing more to add, so I will take his place in saying thank you for watching this show. This is Dr. Jonathan bidding you adieu live from the set of ‘Meet the Press’. I hope you have had as much fun watching this show as I have had making it. Have a good night.”

And that was how the show came to an end, with me smiling at the camera and two corpse-like figures sitting behind me.