



There was something different about Nico Chavez. He had a beguiling magnetism that even Erol wasn't immune to as he sprung to his feet to greet the gubernatorial candidate.

"Congressman Chavez, I'm so glad to finally meet you in person," he said, extending his hand down to the smaller man. They locked eyes and smiled at one another, but Nico's smile felt different somehow; certainly unlike most politicians. Genuine, maybe.

Shaking hands, Erol couldn't help but emphasize his squeeze a little, to see how Chavez would respond. "Please, call me Nico," the Congressman said warmly, squeezing back just enough to stand his ground, "and it's a pleasure to finally meet you as well."

It was just the two of them in a secure meeting room on the sixtieth floor of The Roark, about eighty feet below Erol's swimming pool. They sat across from one another in a cozy corner, each man settled into a comfortable armchair. "To be clear, this room is free of any digital access whatsoever," said Erol, holding up his phone to indicate that it was off. Nico pulled his own phone out and found it had shut off as well. "And there's no surveillance of any sort. You may speak as candidly as you'd like."

Nico smiled. “Okay, Erol, I believe you,” he said. “So why don’t you go ahead and explain to me why I’m here.”

“You’re here because I can make you Governor,” said Erol.

“I’m polling within the margin already, and I have the momentum. I might be able to pull this off without you.”

Old-Erol would have said something combative right then and compromised his position, but *New-Erol* accepted Nico’s hesitance as shrewd. Getting into bed with a highly polarizing tech billionaire went against his cultivated brand of populism, so he’d probably need to run some numbers first. “Maybe so, but why risk it when I can offer you certainty?”

“The problem is I have a feeling that your support would be conditional, and I’m not going to be bought,” said Nico, recycling a line from his stump speeches, delivered with a rehearsed firmness.

“Of course not,” said Erol, “and if you *were* the kind of man to be so easily bought, you wouldn’t have my support in the first place. The fact is, Nico, I respect you. In an unrespectable profession, you strike me as some sort of anomaly—one of the rare, good ones—and I feel like the people of this great state deserve a leader like you.”

Nico sat up a little straighter as he considered the sincerity in Erol’s voice, then asked, “What’s your angle?”

“Can’t I just plead ‘altruism’ and we leave it at that?” said Erol, with a wry smile. Nico laughed.

“You? I’m afraid not.”

“Then let’s call it virtue signaling,” said Erol. “I’ve developed a bit of a nasty reputation over the years—not entirely undeserved, I’ll admit—and I’m trying to make amends. People really believe in what you’re doing, Nico; but goddamnit, you’re not going to win this election without me. If I can get you across

the finish line then it's good for you, good for me, and good for the people.”

Nico looked around the room, his foot tapping as his fingers drummed on the armrest. Not nervously, just processing. Finally, he broke his silence to ask, “What do you mean I won't win?”

“You threatened to take people's guns away, Nico. That's political suicide in this state.”

Nico leaned forward to protest, “That was years ago—” but Erol cut him off, “It doesn't matter. You can't unsay it and no retraction will ever make it go away.”

To his credit, Nico made no effort to argue. He was a bright guy, credentialed from reputable institutions, surely he realized that Erol was right. In a moment of passion during a failed bid in the last gubernatorial election, Nico had told a small crowd that he vowed to round up every automatic weapon in the state. The crowd loved him for it, but the video was less enthusiastically received by the broader voting populace, which effectively derailed his campaign. He'd spent the intervening years trying to distance himself from that statement, but he knew that it remained a stain on his candidacy. “You said that you were offering ‘certainty’ that I would win. What does that mean exactly?”

Erol got very serious and sat up, “What I can offer you is unlimited funding, optimal content distribution through every social media platform, and an event-heavy ground game to generate a record young voter turnout. I've run the numbers every which way and can assure you that my resources, paired with your present momentum, would be more than sufficient to assure your victory.”

Nico listened, nodded along, mulled it over, then said, “At which point you'll want me to approve your train.”

“I’m not asking for funding, just permitting.”

“And land. I understand that you’ll need eminent domain to secure it all.”

Erol shrugged. “Maybe it comes to that, but maybe not. I won’t know until I can get approval to build.” Then he pivoted back to their main topic, “But we can talk about the vactrain when you’re Governor. Right now, I just want to get you elected.”

More tapping and drumming as Nico considered the offer before him: boundless resources to ensure victory, allegedly with no strings attached. It was a hard thing to say no to, yet he still felt like he should somehow, knowing that it could irreparably damage his credibility to accept money from the richest man in the world—to say nothing about how his personal integrity might also suffer.

“You want to say no,” said Erol, smirking. “I get it. What if we gave it a trial run first to see how it feels?”

“What would that even mean?” asked Nico, intrigued.

“I would like to host a building-wide fundraising event for you. Full restaurant buy-out, hotel-wide convention, capped off with a big speech up here in the ballroom,” said Erol, sensing Nico warming up to the idea. “Maybe you raise a million dollars or two, see if it’s a good fit, and if not then you’re welcome to go it alone the rest of the way. If enough people get mad at you, just donate the money to some charity and distance yourself from the whole thing. It won’t hurt my feelings.”

Nico Chavez, a self-declared man of the people, knew that Erol had a point about his campaign hitting a wall on gun control. The polls showed promise, but in his experience the polls had always been rosier than the final outcomes. At the end of the day, the rigors of campaigning would eventually sap the vitality from his message come Election Day, and all too many voters just wouldn’t bother to show up. What if there’s a

thunderstorm? Or even a humid drizzle? The allure of inactivity was just too great.

“Okay, well...” he said. “When?”

Kianna was on her break when the call came in from Erol’s assistant, Kira. Janet found her in a breakroom preparing a cup of tea and insisted that she take the call. “Can I not call her back?” asked Kianna. Janet insisted that she could not.

Kianna took the call at her desk, still dunking her teabag in a cup of hot water.

*“I’ve already sent you an email outlining our needs, but I wanted to speak personally so I may fully convey the urgency of this matter,”* said Kira, wasting no time. Kianna tensed up at the sound of her voice, stirring up bad memories. *“You need to reserve fifty rooms for the eighteenth and nineteenth, and we’ll require all conference and events facilities. This comes from Mr. Zane directly, and his authority supersedes any internal hotel hierarchy, as is clearly outlined in the hotel’s lease with The Roark. Do you have any questions?”*

Kianna had so many questions, most of which she was too intimidated to ask. She tossed the teabag in a bin beneath her desk and pulled up the email, finding it exhaustive. “You’re talking about *this* month? That’s in two weeks. We’re already booked up.”

*“So cancel those bookings. The Roark Hotel will be co-hosting a building-wide event in support of the Nico Chavez campaign, which takes precedent over some furry convention. Do you have any other questions?”*

How did she know it was a furry convention? “No,” said Kianna, letting out an inaudible sigh before blowing off the steam from her cup and taking a sip. The tea was too thin; rushed.

*“Reach out if anything comes up. Additional resources are available if needed; nothing is off-limits. Thank you for your understanding and cooperation,”* said Kira, then hung up.

Kianna spent the rest of her break calling other hotels downtown, trying to find a vacancy to refer the furry convention to, but the closest spot available was in a suburb twenty miles out, and they could only cover half the rooms already booked. Then she had to make the toughest call of her life, putting dozens of furies out on the streets. It didn't go well.

*“Do you have any idea how fucked it is to cancel us with two weeks' notice? We expect hundreds of people coming in from out of town who don't have a room now. People have purchased non-refundable airfare, ma'am!”*

Kianna felt the word *ma'am* and winced. “I understand, and you have every right to feel this way. For what it's worth, I am terribly sorry—” unsurprisingly, her apology was worth very little, and she was promptly cut off.

*“I don't need you to feel sorry, I need you to fix this. I need you to honor our original booking.”*

“I cannot. I'm sorry—”

*“This is because of who we are, isn't it?”* the conference organizer asked. *“Don't think I don't recognize discrimination, ma'am. You have no right to judge us. We're not perverts, ma'am, we're decent people, and you should be ashamed of yourself for assuming otherwise,”* they said, then hung up.

The rest of her workday consisted of fielding various calls from jilted furies, many eschewing coherent words in favor of animalistic sexual moans, as if Kianna were prudish and would take offense, which she wasn't and didn't. Instead, she just let the callers go on. *Baah! Baah! Baaah!* they'd moan, or meow, or grunt, or whatever, and she'd let it continue uninterrupted for minutes, until the callers eventually lost interest. If this is how

they wanted to express their displeasure, fine. They deserved that much. The calls did bother her, though, as they were a response to a misrepresentation of the situation; but she didn't argue.

Some of the emails crossed a line, though—particularly the AI videos that depicted her being railed by anthropomorphic animals of various species, occasionally in groups. A coworker happened to be nearby as she opened one such email, and they found it amusing. Within twenty minutes, the entire hotel staff was aware of her situation. Everyone thought it was hilarious.

But she didn't think it was quite so funny. Perhaps one day she would, assuming it eventually ended, but while she was receiving a dozen emails an hour, she was concerned—and even worse, completely alone in those concerns.

“Oh, they'll get over it,” Janet tried to assure her. “They still have Halloween to look forward to.”

That first night, she returned home with takeout, changed into pajamas, and watched comfort television in bed while she ate. Her cat curled up in her lap and she forgot all about her day for a moment, then said, “I wish the furies weren't so mean.” Her cat meowed, though she wasn't ready to hear another meow yet.

“They think that it's because I hate their lifestyle, but I don't. If it makes them happy to dress up like animals, then I want that for them. If they also get freaky, fine! Go for it! I'm not judging anyone!” The photorealistic videos she'd seen earlier in the day suddenly came to mind, and she shook her head to erase the images. “It's just not my fault, though. I didn't have a say in the matter. But even if I did, it's for a good reason, you know. The weekend could be huge for Nico. It could swing the election. I think the furies would obviously prefer Nico over another four years of Oliver Fordham, and if they really thought about it,

they would *understand* why they got bumped. It's for the greater good." She looked down at her cat for validation, but was dismayed to only find it licking her fork.

Her days were filled primarily with calls and emails from Kira, relaying bookings from various special interest groups and celebrity guests. She was excited to play a part in the big event, but was routinely grounded by the constant phone and email reminders of the damage she'd caused to the furry community. Overwhelmed and exasperated, she answered her phone immediately with a gruff, "What?"

Unbothered, Kira said, "*You'll need to have Conference Room A prepared for a concert at six-thirty on Friday.*" Kianna was mortified to realize she'd spoken that way to Kira, having expected it to be another prank call from an irate furry. She tried to apologize, but Kira didn't allow a word in edgewise. "*The gun safety panel will let out at six-fifteen, so you'll need to have a crew standing by to make the flip successful. Are you adequately staffed to service that?*"

Kianna was scatter-brained, feeling pulled every which way. "I think so," she said, clicking around her computer to find her schedule for the day in question, and she accidentally opened her email to find a new video depicting her being sodomized by a particularly husky polar bear. She couldn't suppress a panicked squeak as she frantically closed the window.

"*Are the furries upsetting you?*" Kira asked. Kianna froze, stunned. How did she know anything about that? "*I'll handle them,*" Kira said, "*You just focus on implementing the operations for a problem-free weekend. Remember that additional resources are available to you if necessary, you only have to ask.*" Then she hung up.



Kianna attended her bi-weekly appointment with her therapist, which was always a clarifying experience. She poured her frustrations out in one long, chaotic rant, zigzagging between overlapping problems from the furies, her coworkers, and Kira. “Hearing her voice ten times a day might be the biggest trigger of all,” said Kianna, reclining back in the chair, “it just always reminds me of the Massacre. I was in an elevator when she announced the lockdown was over, and just a few minutes later, I was tackled and surrounded by shouting men with guns.”

“I know I’ve said this before—” her therapist began to say, but Kianna saw what was coming. “—I know, it’s not healthy for me to keep working in the building—but they gave me this big promotion and nobody else is going to pay me what they are. I really need this job.”

Which was true. Having been the only member of the hotel staff trapped inside during the Massacre, her bosses were quick to promote her to find a positive angle to divert focus from the murders elsewhere in the building. Her pay doubled, she was given proper benefits, and they’d shown her an abundance of patience as she learned the role. She was gracious at first, but over time she began to feel trapped, constantly struggling to justify her unearned position; hopeless to ever rise above it.

They moved on to discuss the videos from the furies, and how Kianna had felt ridiculed by her peers at her revulsion to them. “I’m getting these threatening photorealistic images of myself being sexually assaulted by animal-people, and everyone just thinks it’s funny. It’s not funny, though! It’s scary! These people are really mad at me, and it’s not my fault! It wasn’t my decision to cancel them, but they’re accusing me of a *hate crime!*”

“How many of these messages have you received?” asked her therapist, and as Kianna stopped to count, she realized that she hadn’t seen one since Kira said she’d handle it.

“It was a lot for a few days,” said Kianna, “but I guess they’ve stopped.”

“Oh!” said her therapist, sitting up straight, “well, that sounds like a problem solved! How does that make you feel?” Kianna didn’t necessarily see it that way, though. If Kira did something to make the problem go away, how exactly did she implement such an immediate solution? Somehow, that felt more concerning.

“Fine,” she said, deciding not to pull that thread any further. “One less thing to worry about.” She smiled.

Just days before launch, with everything booked to capacity and brilliantly scheduled by Kira, Kianna felt calm. Her inbox was down to a trickle and the calls had completely ceased, until Kira reached out in the late afternoon, inviting her to Nico’s big speech on Saturday night. She’d get the opportunity to meet the candidate and join him on stage.

“In the sixtieth-floor ballroom?” asked Kianna, fidgeting with a pen on her desk.

“Yes,” said Kira. Kianna paused and considered going up there for the first time since the Massacre, her memory of the room forever tainted by the acerbic stink of a collective post-coital shame. “*Is that a problem for you?*” asked Kira, with subtle derision.

“No,” Kianna lied, “I would be honored to attend. Thank you.” Her calendar updated instantly.

*“On behalf of Mr. Zane, thank you for everything. We understand the difficult position that you were put in, and appreciate your amazing work despite those obstacles. We look forward to a flawless*

*weekend, to which you are deserving of full credit.*” Then the call ended.

Friday morning began with news of a furry sex tape racket that had been busted, resulting in dozens of arrests. They had all been linked to Kianna’s mass email indicating the abrupt cancellation, and the hotel was being hailed for heroically exposing a gang of disguised sex criminals. Kianna didn’t know exactly how to feel about the whole thing and really didn’t want to think too much about it just yet—she had more immediate business to attend to.

All of which ran smoothly. A few uninformed furies still showed up hauling massive luggage and were sadly turned away, but all without incident. One couple did ask to speak to a manager, but they promptly dropped the matter after being informed of the various arrests linked to an illegal smut trade. Otherwise, the hotel was abuzz with an overwhelming enthusiasm for progressivism, and Kianna was taken by it.

With the day’s operations pretty well under control, she took in a couple panels and got to agree with like-minded people. They agreed about big things and little things, debated semantics about particulars, and felt collectively hopeful. She learned more about things she knew a little about, and realized that she was wrong about other things that she thought she’d learned before but had perhaps misremembered. In all, she felt as though her time was well spent, and she took pride in having been told she deserved *full credit*.

But beneath those high spirits, she was nervous about meeting Nico. What would she say to him? She had to say something, of course. She needed a topic that she was passionate about, and she needed to be informed about it. What if he asked her a

question and she didn't know the answer? She couldn't risk looking foolish. She idly rubbed her fingers.

So she decided on gun reform. She didn't used to care about guns at all, not until the Massacre; but ever since then, she'd hated them. They made her nervous. So, she witnessed gun violence testimonials and learned about proposed gun control legislation, and she decided to tell Nico, 'Congressman Chavez, I'm so excited that you've co-sponsored eleven bills targeting gun violence and resources for victims,' and he'll know that she's for real. For real and deserving of full credit for the weekend's success. Tomorrow night, she might meet the next Governor.

Upstairs. In the ballroom.

The latest polling data showed Chavez stalled within three points of Fordham, making his Saturday night speech crucial less than three weeks before the election. It would be prominently livestreamed via Erol's social media platform, giving Chavez the largest stage yet to make his case. The whole building was kinetic.

Erol awoke early and went for a six-mile run. He showered, shaved, ate a hearty breakfast, and took a midday nap. When he awoke in the early afternoon, he was refreshed and ready to anoint Chavez the next Governor, no matter what anyone else felt about it. He glared out his window at The Local. Those bastards.

He adjourned to his balcony for tea, overlooking the Capitol. "Assuming the speech goes well, will it be enough to overtake Fordham?"

*"Guns remain a critical issue in this campaign, and many dedicated voters are inflexible on gun control. The only way to*

*overcome that firewall is to increase turnout, particularly among younger voters."*

"Well, we certainly can't count on that. Can't we just cheat somehow?"

*"That remains our fallback option, yes, but legitimacy would be preferred."* He didn't quite agree with that, figuring that it was generally preferable to take a shortcut when available.

He mulled things over, idly staring down upon the dome far below, and casually said, "Frankly, I'd rather that these people didn't have guns at all. Do you think Chavez could actually enact meaningful legislation?"

"No," said Kira, and Erol frowned, disappointed.

"Could you change that somehow?" he wondered aloud.

*"Of course,"* said Kira, and Erol perked back up.

He took his time getting ready for the event, making sure he looked his best for when he'd introduce Chavez ahead of the big speech. He knew Kira was watching him, curious about what he'd say tonight, knowing he hadn't prepared anything. *"I believe it would be best if you used the disc,"* said Kira finally, completely unprompted, *"if only just for the speech, of course."*

He hadn't used the pebble but the one time since its update, but the whole experience had left him feeling empty. Only through focused effort had he recently begun to feel human again, and he wasn't prepared to risk slipping back into emptiness. "I believe that I'll just speak from the heart," said Erol, struggling with his necktie, frustrated by having completely forgotten how to tie it. But he kept his frustrations to himself and methodically worked through the problem, trying to stir long-dormant muscle-memory into action.

He watched his fingers clumsily loop and tighten the fabric just to loosen it again, and his right eye began to twitch. A small sphere rolled across the countertop holding up a tablet, and

began to play a video that Erol had produced fifteen years ago which instructed how to properly tie a necktie. The Erol of the present watched the Erol of the past quickly demonstrate it, then reverse the entire process and do it again slowly, clearly explaining each step. He followed along and successfully completed his task, feeling accomplished, and not at all tempted to remind Kira that he'd asked that all those videos be deleted. Nope, not the slightest bit tempted at all.

He took his private elevator down to the ballroom, arriving while a band was wrapping up their set. Kira messaged him updates, directing him to the back of the stage where he was to meet Kianna, the hotel's hospitality coordinator, and introduce her to Congressman Chavez. He could feel eyes on him as he breezed through the back halls of the sixtieth floor, paying no attention to the gawkers, nearly walking right by Kianna until his watch alerted him to her presence. "Well, there you are," said Erol, smiling warmly as he looked down to her, "Kianna, right?" She beamed a wide smile back up at him to overcompensate for her nervousness, which he mistook as an indication of sexual interest. He extended his hand to her.

"Yes, Mr. Zane," she said still smiling; very professional, not at all flirtatious. "Thank you so much for inviting me tonight." She placed her small hand in his and he handled it gently, running his long thumb softly up her wrist. She tensed at his touch as he continued to misinterpret her nervousness.

"No, thank *you*, Kianna. Kira tells me that you deserve full credit for this wonderful event. I understand that this all came at you very fast, but you seem to have handled everything fabulously. I'm thoroughly impressed." He smiled again, more nefariously than intended, and she smiled bigger than before. He felt certain that he could sleep with her if he wanted to, but

then the Congressman arrived and interrupted the mood, and Erol turned to greet him, “Congressman Chavez, it’s so good to see you. How are you feeling tonight?”

“I’m well, Erol, thank you,” he said. The two men smiled at one another and shook hands, Erol applying more pressure than necessary, and Nico added, “The turnout this weekend has been incredible. I really can’t thank you enough for putting it all together on such short notice.”

Erol laughed, “It’s funny that you say that. Kianna here is the one who gets full credit for everything. She’s been tremendous throughout this process and, as you can tell, we asked *a lot* of her over these past couple weeks.”

Kianna’s hand wobbled as she reached over to shake the Congressman’s. He smiled at her in a way that felt uniquely theirs. It was as though he’d smiled similarly a million times before, but that particular one was different somehow, and she felt respected by it. “Kianna,” he said, their eyes locked, “thank you for all of your amazing work. You’ve made a significant contribution to this campaign and I’d love it if you would join me on the stage tonight. Would that be alright?”

Kianna nodded emphatically, still smiling, not sure what to say so she simply said, “Thank you. Yes. Thank you,” and wondered if this were her chance to talk about the issues, as if she should just blurt out something about guns and spoil the pleasantries, but instead she repeated, “Thank you.”

Erol quietly left the politician to gladhand with his constituent, and he stood alone by the edge of the stage as a crew quickly removed the band’s gear. He thought about what to say and realized that people weren’t there to see him. They were there because they were excited about political revolution or whatever; they couldn’t give a shit about what he had to say. Then he received his signal to address the room.

He stepped out on the stage and found the microphone set too low, but he didn't bother to adjust it or remove it from the stand, instead he stooped slightly to speak, knowing that he'd be brief. "Thank you for coming," he said, "I would just like to say that I've been stunned by the tremendous turnout that we've seen this weekend. Your energy inspires and your hope is infectious, and I am just as excited as you knowing that our next Governor will be Nico Chavez. But, please, don't listen to me—I'm just an out-of-touch billionaire. Let the man himself convince you of why you should get out and vote for him—rain or shine—because there's something about him that's just... *different*. Genuine, maybe. So let's bring him out, your future Governor, Nico Chavez!"

He clapped and drew applause as he walked off-stage, which was still in a transitionary state as everyone had expected his introduction to run at least another few minutes. The crew rushed out some risers and two rows of guests were herded onto them, including Kianna in the first row, front and center. Without Chavez onstage, she felt as though everyone were staring directly at her, and she fidgeted as she looked out over the ballroom, her nostrils twitching as she recalled the stench from the last time she'd been there. She glanced off-stage, hoping Chavez would show up soon and take all the attention off of her, but only saw Erol, leering. She shuddered.

The Congressman came out to raucous cheers and sustained applause, and he smiled and waved through it all. It may have been his biggest campaign yet, but it was still his fourth in seven years, and he'd become a seasoned vet on the circuit. One lesson that he'd learned along the way was to take full advantage of these opportunities to just shut up and smile.

When the applause died out organically, Chavez began to speak and everyone listened. He commanded the room with the



same charm that had affected Erol when they first met. Something about his everyman demeanor melted away decades of cynicism about good people in politics, and everyone felt a palpable, collective hope. Finally, they had a candidate who genuinely cared.

He talked about jobs and the economy, and he talked about their changing climate and the importance of conservancy. He spoke to people in a way that respected them, acknowledging that he was a public servant and worked for *their* interests. He spoke briefly about safety in a general sense, which segued specifically into guns, and that was when someone raised a rifle from the crowd. The glint from the scope caught Kianna's eye a second before the gun was fired, and she froze, her face already scrunched up when the weapon was discharged, the bullet clipping Chavez's ear and grazing Kianna's cheek.

Chavez never ducked. He instinctively reached up to touch his ear, the flesh hot, then he clenched his hand into a fist and raised it overhead, staring into the camera for the livestream as blood trickled down his neck, and he declared, "I will not be intimidated by your culture of death!" Quick to the soundbite. A seasoned vet indeed.

Security sprang into action quickly and a second bullet sought justice for the first, generating mass hysteria as the would-be assassin collapsed dead among the crowd. "Please, friends," pleaded Chavez as people began to shove toward the exits, "let's be calm! Be courteous to one another! The threat has been eliminated!" In short order, the room came to a standstill, silent. Chavez shook off medical attention and said, "We've all just experienced a traumatic event and we should take a moment to process that." He looked back to find Kianna being tended to, a slight cut across her cheek, and it stirred something primal deep within.

“This has become all too common in our state!” he said, fired up, channeling his raw anger into righteous indignation. The traumatized crowd agreed, and Chavez took the opportunity to host an impromptu town hall about gun violence. It was a huge boost for the livestream. Massive engagement as people traded their various screeds from far opposite ends of the political divide. Great for business.

But Erol didn't really give a shit, so he disappeared into his private elevator and left the scene behind. Back home, he showered, got into his pajamas, and had champagne served on his balcony, overlooking the Capitol dome. “That shooting sure was convenient,” he said, “I don't suppose we had anything to do with it.” Kira wisely didn't respond.

He leaned over the railing, staring down at the cupola atop the dome. Right then, somewhere below him, the next Governor was experiencing the defining moment of his campaign. The authorities had shut down the official livestream, but they didn't stop Chavez from gathering everyone together for an impromptu group therapy session, displaying every bit the compassionate leader that his campaign had claimed he was. It was a good thing that Erol was doing, seeing to it that Chavez would be elected. Giving people what they wanted. If only everyone knew that he was responsible for it, though. They'd thank him if they knew.

“I want Chavez here on election night. I want a big event in the ballroom and I want Chavez to give his acceptance speech there.”

*“That's a big ask,” said Kira. “Chavez already has a tentative plan along with a contingency on the books, and it would undermine his messaging to cancel in favor of a billionaire's ball.”*

“So ask it, see what he says. See if he appreciates what we’ve done for him.”

*“He knows less than you do about what we’ve ‘done for him,’ though. Any relationship with Chavez going forward needs to be clandestine. You witnessed him getting shot less than an hour ago, and you’re already upstairs drinking champagne in your pajamas. This is not a relationship that should be made public,”* said Kira, making a good point. Upon reflection, it was kind of a dick move for him to walk away from the problem to reflect upon what a great guy he’d been. What was wrong with him?

He finished his champagne and pitched the glass off the balcony, set to fall nearly nine-hundred feet into a public park near the Capitol, and he was back inside before it landed. “I want an election night party anyway. Fuck it if Chavez doesn’t come. If I’m going to be responsible for his success, I’m hitching a ride on his wagon whether he likes it or not. And get that Black girl as my date. I sensed that she wanted to fuck me tonight, and I want to give the people what they want.”

“*Kianna?*” asked Kira, confused.

“Yeah, her. Is she alright, by the way? Did she get hit or something?”

“*She’ll be fine.*”

“Her face, though—any cuts or bruises?” he paused for a moment, then said, “You know what, fuck it, I’ll take her busted or not.” He walked into his bathroom and began to brush his teeth, staring at himself in the mirror. He rinsed and spit. “Because I’m not superficial, and people need to see that. People need to see that I’m different now.”

And he *was* different, in many ways. He stared into the mirror trying to spot them all, but his memories were already hazy of how he’d looked before. His jawline had clearly been strengthened and there was the chin implant, but everything

else was fuzzy. Maybe his cheekbones had been raised, or his forehead reshaped. Everything better, whatever he'd done. He was goddamn handsome these days.

“I’m a *good guy*,” he said, watching his mouth form each syllable, considering ways to improve his delivery. Optimizing. Holding at the end to let his dimples pop. “I’m a good guy.”