

CHAPTER 1

Clement's Lament

UNTIL EIGHT THIRTY, when her unexpected visitor appeared, the weightiest things on the ex-governor's mind were the pink curlers in her hair.

Patty sipped her mimosa, gazing in frustration through the veranda's windows. Last night's rainstorm had stopped, and while she was glad for that, an impenetrable mist still hovered over the beach. If there were any surfer boys out there, she couldn't see them through her binoculars.

As if to make amends, the fog parted like a stage curtain over the indoor pool's glass roof, allowing her a clear view of Mylo instead. Strutting in a navy-blue swimsuit along the edge of the water, the new pool boy skimmed the surface with his long-handled net, wielding his tool with the practiced grace of an Olympic athlete. Patty focused her spyglass on the youth's nicely rounded buttocks, scanning his bare shoulders and toned biceps, lingering on his outstanding pectorals. A chest like that could be dangerous. Letting out a sigh, she imagined squeezing all of Mylo's muscles as eagerly as she ogled them, all the way down to his toes.

Looking up, he caught her gaze and grinned at her. Patty froze for a second before shifting her binoculars innocently back to the fog. *Oh, what the heck, he's eighteen. Wait, what's this?*

Something solid and blurry blocked her binoculars. Patty looked up, startled to see the lanky Englishman standing three feet before her.

“Nigel! How long have you been lurking there?”

The man, dressed in a gray business suit with a blue polka-dot tie, shook his head in disapproval. “That will be enough of that, Governor. Eyes off the pool boy. I texted and emailed you last night. Didn’t you get my messages? I left a call on your phone too.”

“I just got up. You know I never look at my messages before ten.”

“We have to talk—it’s urgent.”

Nigel said he’d rushed there to discuss the bombshell story that broke overnight. As her former chief of staff, he thought it only fitting he should be the first to discuss the matter with her.

He drove twenty-five miles to Durango Beach to inform her about some political news? He must have more to tell her than that. Patty was not a huge fan of Senator Harry Clement, but the news about him couldn’t be true. “Blackface? Harry Clement?”

“See for yourself.” Nigel grabbed the remote off her side table and turned on her television.

The talking heads on CNN were buzzing about a grainy old photograph. It showed a little white boy with a big grin, sitting astride an enormous pumpkin, a cardboard box covering him from his chin to his knees. Sticking out of the box, his face, arms, and legs were stained dark brown.

Patty squinted at the screen. “That’s Clement?”

“A disturbing photograph of Democratic front-runner Senator Harry Clement in blackface has been discovered,” the news anchor said. “This highly disturbing image was the subject of a front-page article in this morning’s *New York Times*. The Clement campaign has

not yet responded to our reporter with an explanation, despite our many attempts to get through.”

“But that’s ridiculous.”

“No, it’s not,” Nigel replied. “For Clement, it’s curtains. He’ll never survive this.”

The butler, clad in livery, entered the veranda and set Patty’s breakfast before her. She took a bite of bacon and bent her neck forward.

Maybe it was Clement. Nigel Windborne, an astute political operative, took such pride in getting his facts straight he was considered an insufferable know-it-all. He was almost always right, and even when he wasn’t, he was awfully convincing.

“He looks like he’s six years old.”

Nigel pulled a note out of his coat pocket. “Five years, two months, and three days. Clement was rather large for his age. They found the photograph in his kindergarten yearbook. Happy Trails Kindergarten, Topeka, Kansas.”

“Who found it?”

“Nobody knows. A reporter at *The New York Times* got hold of it somehow. Anyway, who cares how? It’s explosive news all the same. That’s the end for Clement. It’s tits up for his campaign.”

“You keep saying that. Please stop saying that.”

Nigel clicked through the cable news channels. All of them were discussing the Clement photograph. “I thought you ought to know straightaway, Governor. You need to get ready. It’s only two months until the Iowa caucus. We have a million things to do.”

“What?”

“The party is bound to draft you to run in Clement’s place. Somebody electable has to take on Diebold. That would be you.”

She sniffed at him. “I’m sorry you bothered to drive down here to tell me about this. I’ve told you a dozen times: I’m done with politics. John Fist has seen to that. I’m not running for president, ever.”

“And why not, if I may ask?”

She stared through the windows, into the fog. “It was so hard at first. I cried my eyes out for months after the election, but I made my peace with it. Nobody in the world wants me to run for president anymore, not after all this time. Nobody.”

Her former aide stood erect, as if about to salute. “I do. I want to join your campaign.”

“Well, that’s sweet, Nigel. Nobody but you.”

“You’re selling yourself short. Five years ago you were the odds-on favorite. Everyone said so. And you were so keen to run.”

That was before arch-conservative state senator John Fist had defeated her, making California’s financial woes and Patty’s role in causing them the focus of his campaign. *That damned Fist.*

She flung her head back and bit her lip, gathering the shards of her self-respect. “I have accepted the verdict of the voters. My political career is over. The party will never forgive me for losing to Fist. ‘If she couldn’t even win re-election in California, she can’t win the country.’ That’s what they’ll say. So what if they don’t have Pitypander to kick around anymore? Who cares?”

“That’s just hurt feelings talking.”

She picked up her mimosa and clutched it with both hands. “I have a perfect right to my hurt feelings. I’ve earned them fair and square. I may as well enjoy them in my forced retirement.”

Nigel leaned his long arms against the back of an overstuffed chair. “Hurt feelings are no excuse for abandoning your dreams. Get over it. You nearly won. With a couple thousand more votes, you’d still be in the governor’s mansion and Harry Clement would be eating your dust in the primaries. Time to get back on the old horse, Patty.”

“It’s already November. It’s six months too late to launch a presidential campaign.”

“No, it’s *almost* too late. We still have time, if you act now.”

“I’m too old.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You’re only fifty-five. Clement is ten years older.”

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“Benny won’t let me.”

Nigel rolled his eyes. “Have you actually asked Benito?”

“Not directly,” she said. “But I know he’s tired of my politicking. The very mention of it seems to give him gas. He’s made more than enough money off me already. He lives his life in Vegas, I live mine here, and we get along fine that way.”

He sat down in front of her. “What the deuce has got into you? You’re the former governor of California for goodness’ sake. You’re a modern woman. It isn’t 1954. You don’t need your husband’s approval to run for office.”

The Diva of the Downtrodden they used to call her in Sacramento. Heroine of the Hopeless. A first-rank leader of the feminist movement. But she was a wife, too, if only in name. At least she still did a good imitation of one.

Her eyes settled on a Renoir on the wall. A young bride, decked out in a wedding gown, danced joyfully with a man in a flower garden. “No, I don’t need Benny’s okay, but I wouldn’t feel right running without it. He’s still my husband.”

“Well, things are coming your way, Patty. Like it or not, the whole world is coming your way, and fast. Mark my words, you will be running for president. America needs Patty Pitypander. No, America demands Patty Pitypander!”

“It’s out of the question.”

Nigel threw up his hands. “You’ll see—within a fortnight. They’re already talking about you out there. Won’t you at least think about it?”

“All right, I’ll humor you and think about it, but don’t expect me to change my mind, because I won’t.”

“In a fortnight you’ll be calling me for help.” Nigel stood up, turned, and left.

Patty shuffled across the veranda in her slippers and peered out the window at the ocean. Shivering, she pulled her bathrobe around

her shoulders. She hadn't asked for this. She wasn't ready to run for president. She hadn't even put on her makeup.

The fog began to lift. Looking down at the beach, she spied a surfer paddling frantically toward a wave. It crested and passed him by an instant too soon. But right behind it a much bigger and better wave was surging. He could catch this one if he got back on his surfboard now. Right now.

Patty reached for her binoculars. The surfer was handsome, broad-shouldered, and about twenty years old, his eyes blazing with determination. He recognized his opportunity, clambered back onto his surfboard, paddled toward the new wave, and caught it just in time.

They were already talking about her, according to Nigel. Was this her fresh new wave approaching?

She padded back to her lounge chair, where a paperback book with a bare-chested man on its cover lay on a side table next to a tall stack of similar works. Jenessa Fuller, the heroine of *In Love We Tryst*, had trysted entirely too much for her own good and found herself in the throes of a terrible heartache. Patty would learn Jenessa's fate within the next hundred pages, perhaps by lunchtime. She picked up the book and read from where she'd left off the night before:

And in the dense and dying twilight, Jenessa imagined she saw his manly form lying upon the pearly white sand, his steely arms beckoning to her, his ruby lips breathing her name into the ether: "Come to me, Jenessa." But every thought of him was an illusion, a mere trick of her febrile imagination. For he was not there. Jenessa had been abandoned.

Patty laid the book down, too perturbed to read further. Jenessa Fuller's world was a thousand times simpler than hers. The sultry heroine had only to figure out how to bed the shirtless studs on the

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covers of Marjorie Mickle's one hundred romance novels. She never aged a day or needed Botox to disguise her accumulating wrinkles. Former staffers did not come barging into her home to disturb her breakfast, encouraging her to embark on such an arduous quest as running for the presidency of the United States.

After a few seconds Patty lifted her eyes once more to look at the little brown boy on the television screen. No, this time Nigel Windborne was wrong. Harry Clement surely had the political savvy to wriggle out of this.



AS A PHALANX of reporters armed with cameras and microphones shoved their way into his campaign headquarters, the leading Democratic contender for the presidency regarded his uninvited guests with grim resolve. "I was a fudge brownie," he thundered. "Yes, a fudge brownie!"

The media wasn't buying it. Harry Clement could tell from their faces. A fudge brownie? Looks of amused disbelief filled the room.

"Goddamit, I was five years old," the senator said. "It was a Halloween party sixty years ago. I'm sure the other kids must have been dressed up as something similar."

Clement's left hand trembled. His right swept the sweat from his forehead. For decades he had prepared for this: the campaign of his life. All those years of backroom deals, clawing his way to the chairmanship of powerful committees in the House and Senate, kissing colicky babies, begging donors for contributions, and now it was going to end like this? His lifelong struggle for power was to be undone by an ancient photograph that came out of nowhere?

"How do you know you were a fudge brownie? What corroborating evidence can you give us?" asked one reporter.

"It's obvious! Look at the damn photo!"

“Could be a Fig Newton,” said a female Associated Press reporter in the front row. “They’re square too.”

As anyone who knew anything about classic American cookies could plainly see, the boy in the photograph looked nothing like a Fig Newton. Clement stared the woman down. *You brainless nincompoop, you’re just trying to get my goat.* “Take my word for it. I was a brownie.”

But how could the senator be sure, much less prove it? After six decades, who could know what kind of high-calorie pastry he might have impersonated in his formative years, long before posing as an upstanding politician had become his vocation? The only clue was the rectangular shape of the cardboard box around his middle.

Screw the truth. Full speed ahead. Clement puffed out his chest. No way these jackals were going to tear him to pieces.

A reporter from ABC News waved his arm. “Senator! Senator!”

Clement called on him.

The reporter, a man with a well-coifed hairdo, was exactly the kind of airhead journalist the senator despised. He held up a copy of the photo like it was a smoking gun. “Senator, you initially denied the allegation it was you in the picture. Then two days later you admitted it was you. Why did you lie before about being a fudge brownie, or are you lying now?”

“I didn’t lie.” Clement sighed. “I didn’t think it was me, okay? Well, I wasn’t sure it was me. For Christ’s sake, how could I know who was under all that, that—brown stuff?”

“You don’t know what you looked like at five? You don’t have other childhood photos of yourself? Really?”

Clement clutched his forehead, as if that would stop the throbbing. “Of course I know what I looked like, but not in blackface—I mean in brownie face, I mean as a brownie, dammit, because that’s what I was, yes, a brownie, and nothing but a brownie, so help me God, I swear.”

The senator didn’t even recall until yesterday what the name of his kindergarten was. His staff had spent all last night scrambling to

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find out. Alas, they discovered the Happy Trails Kindergarten had closed down forty years ago. Clement couldn't remember the names of his classmates or teachers, and it seemed unlikely they would risk revealing themselves to an unforgiving world to bail him out now, as he might soon be *persona non grata*. Radioactive, even.

The biggest mystery was how such a rare photograph had fallen into the hands of *The New York Times* just as Clement had emerged as the Democratic front-runner. The timing was no coincidence. Who was sabotaging his campaign?

"What do you know about the photo, and how do you know it?" asked a reporter from NBC News.

"I found a copy of it in our family scrapbook after the story broke. I don't remember ever seeing it there before. I assume my mother must have saved it. On the back she wrote, 'Harry at his first Halloween party.' That's all I know."

"Was this your mother's bright idea? Are you blaming her for this, Senator?"

"Blame? There's no one to blame here. I was a fudge brownie, a perfectly innocent fudge brownie, I tell you!"

"So you deny any responsibility for your actions?"

"I'm sure it wasn't my idea. Dammit, what five-year-old boy decides to dress up as anything, much less a fudge brownie? I must have been pressured or bullied into it by some grownup. They made me do it."

The silver-haired Senate majority leader had been a victim of bullying in his childhood. It was a plausible excuse, even for a man at the highest rungs of national power. Wasn't everyone a victim these days? Overcoming adversity in his early years might even elicit admiration. But Clement knew this alibi was risky. It sealed off one hole in his defense only to open a bigger one: If little Harry had been the victim of bullying, his mother must have been the bully.

Clement's mother—what about her? Like baying hounds, following the scent of an even deeper scandal, the reporters took off in hot pursuit.

WILL WORSLEY

“Why did your mother think dressing you up in blackface was acceptable?” asked one of them. “What about the Black kids in your kindergarten class? Didn’t she have any regard for their feelings before packing you off to school as a fudge brownie to offend them?”

“There weren’t any Black kids to offend, dammit! My school was all white!”

All white. It just slipped out of him. The room fell silent.

“Oh? Was that your mother’s idea too? To send you to a segregated kindergarten? What was her purpose in doing that? Did that make it more comfortable for you to wear blackface?”

Bluish veins, taut and angry, stood out on Clement’s neck. He hadn’t meant to throw his ninety-six-year-old mother to the wolves, not that she would ever know in her addled condition. To fend them off, he would appeal to their common decency.

“Could we leave my poor old mother out of this, please?”

“Isn’t your upbringing a relevant issue for the voters, Senator Clement? Don’t they have a right to know how their candidates for president were raised and what values their parents instilled in them?”

Clement wiped his brow again as he glanced at the front window. A separate commotion was building on the sidewalk outside the campaign headquarters. Protesters were marching in a circle, waving signs printed with the words “No Blackface in the White House, No Clemency for Clement.”

“I was a fudge brownie, dammit,” said the senator. “Really.”



THE MAN IN the baggy brown suit had just rolled his luggage through the jet bridge when his phone buzzed.

Damn, can’t Laprinsky wait until I get into town? I’ll be there in an hour. No, Lieutenant Colonel Laprinsky would not wait. His supervisor was like an expectant father when doing assignments for Bludinov.

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After scanning the gate area, the man merged into the river of people rolling their suitcases down the terminal. The next gate was just as crowded. He continued on, passing ten more gates before spotting an empty seating area in a corner. With his back to the wall, he laid his coat over his phone to shield it from airport security cameras and reached under the lapel to enter his fifteen-digit security code.

“Congratulations, Krok,” the text message from Laprinsky read. “I see phase one of mission is accomplished.”

Krok punched in his reply. “Have arrived in Las Vegas, going next to Pitypander Palace to investigate.”

“One more thing,” Laprinsky’s next message read. “Destroy all remaining copies of Clement photo.”

“Will do.” Krok opened his briefcase and looked at the little brown boy on the pumpkin, still grinning up at him. The photo was incriminating evidence, to be sure, but to destroy such a fine piece of artwork would be a shame. Someone must have spent weeks on it, getting the details of the face just right. The eyes must have been the hardest part. They glowed with the wonder and joy of a five-year-old. Could a politician of such importance as Clement ever have had such innocent eyes?

Oh, well, I’m sure they have extra copies in Moscow. Krok tore the photo to pieces.