

CHAPTER 1

THE INAUGURATION

NO ONE AMONG the living noticed the television remote rising from the credenza and floating away in midair. The only Secret Service agent on duty in the West Wing's basement had fallen sound asleep, his body sprawled across a red leather chair.

Two semi-transparent ghosts, outlined by a shimmering light, took shape. One was tall and gangly with unruly gray hair, the other short, portly, and balding, with a round face. Both ghosts wore frock coats and knee breeches.

Now is our chance, thought the tall one, clutching the remote. Eyeing the snoring agent, he motioned toward the other side of the room, where colorful images flashed across a big screen. They crept toward it.

The problem was that the screen was silent, despite never having been silent before. One of the living had inopportunistly made its sound go away.

The tall ghost folded his brow. Puzzling over the remote, he whispered to his comrade, "This object controls the sound as well as the screen, if I remember rightly." He flipped it over.

Observing that there were no buttons on the back, he held it up to the light and shook it, as if that might yield some clue about how it worked.

The short ghost cupped his palsied hand to his ear and said with a toothless lisp, "I can't hear them, Jefferson. Make the talking box talk louder, if you please."

Jefferson chuckled. "It's a television, not a talking box, Mr. Adams. They've been using them for decades. You should at least try to keep up."

Adams scowled at it. "I know very well what it is, sir—a contraption that promotes sloth and witlessness in equal measure. And I have seen, to my horror and deep regret, how thoughtlessly they stare at it, for hours at a time! It is misnamed. They should have termed it a stupidifier. Television—bah!"

Jefferson enjoyed watching television no more than Adams but sometimes found it useful. The ghosts were stuck at the White House and couldn't slip down to the Capitol to see the new president for themselves. Television would summon the Capitol to them.

The two beheld America's president-elect: a thin, flat-chested woman in her fifties with short-cropped brown hair. Wisely, she wore no hat, as it would have been carried off at once by the stiff breeze. Her pink woolen overcoat, fluorescent in the midday sunlight, dazzled the crowd. She stepped cautiously toward the podium on pink platform shoes, nearly tipping over like a bowling pin.

The ghosts looked quizzically at each other. This was the new president?

"Hurry, she's getting ready to speak," said Adams. "Make them talk louder!"

Jefferson's fingers fumbled over the remote's buttons. There were so many. What did they all do? Power ON/OFF? No, that

one couldn't be right—the image was already there on the wall. What did CH plus or CH minus mean? Or REC, or LAST, or VOL plus or VOL minus?

“Be quick about it, or we'll miss her address,” Adams urged. “Or worse, that stout young fellow there may awake and see us. Just try one of them. Any of them.”

Jefferson tensed up. VOL? Could it signify volition, perhaps? No, that made little sense. Voluminous? Voluble? Volume?

That had to be it: not volume as in three-dimensional Euclidean space, but as in sound.

“Oh, isn't this device fascinating, Mr. Adams?” asked Jefferson with glee. “Why, discovering its secrets would afford me untold hours of amusement.”

“We haven't got hours, nor even minutes. Hurry!”

Jefferson pressed the VOL plus button and heard a faint noise. “Ah, success!” He pushed the button again until the sound was loud enough to overcome Adams's deafness, but not so loud as to wake the guard.

“Well done, Thomas.” Adams patted Jefferson on the shoulder. “Your tinker's knack for gadgetry has won the day. You would have made a fine clockmaker.”

The president-elect turned her brown puppy-dog eyes to the smiling crowd standing on the Capitol steps. Women wearing pink hats, presumably her most fervent supporters, dotted the river of people spilling down the Mall. To suffer the bitter January cold so patiently, they must harbor high hopes for this unprepossessing woman. But why?

The new president's critics complained she had little knowledge of the workings of government or anything else of utility. She was even considered by some to be quite stupid.

Jefferson sensed that the charge of stupidity was unfair, that it carried the odor of naked partisanship. The woman must

possess some skill or virtue that had gone unrecognized. Hadn't she once been governor of the great state of California? Was it possible to become president with absolutely no qualifications whatsoever? Could a complete fool be elected to the White House these days?

The corners of her mouth turned up in an odd, self-satisfied way. Jefferson took this to be a sign of smugness, excessive self-regard, or conceit. He had witnessed that same odious look many times before—on the proud faces of kings and princes, their flatterers at court, and even the lowliest politicians of backwoods America. Conceit, he observed, was a most empty and unsatisfying trait, requiring neither talent nor pedigree to strut its stuff.

And conceit in a woman, it was universally agreed, was worse, being more repellent than in a man, a vice unbecoming the sublime humility expected of the fairer sex. Men could be more readily forgiven for being blowhards, as it was ingrained in their nature, even making them attractive to certain kinds of women, notably the foolish ones.

A haughty president, with the highest station in the land within her grasp? Jefferson could imagine nothing worse. What did she intend to do with her newly acquired powers?

"Repeat after me, please," said the black-robed chief justice. A gust of wind hoisted his thinning mane of white hair as if it were unfurling a sail.

The woman's words echoed slowly after his, with a delivery stiff and practiced. "I, Patricia Ingratelli Pitypander," the woman enunciated with a queenly air, following the justice's cue.

She repeated the oath of office without misspeaking a single syllable. As the tension drained from her face, she shook the old man's hand and grinned. The second female President of the United States, Patty Pitypander, had sworn on a Bible to

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protect the Constitution and faithfully execute the laws of the country. But would she?

Just then, the Marine band struck up “Hail to the Chief.”

“I don’t like the looks of this...this Pitypander woman,” Adams announced with a snort.

Jefferson hung his head. “Nor do I, sadly. From what little I have heard about her, she has nothing to recommend her for the presidency, or any high office.”

Despite the ghosts’ reservations about the new president, a twenty-one-gun salute boomed across the Capitol grounds in her honor.

“Is that the new vice president behind her to the left, that young man with the wolf-like eyes?” Adams asked.

“I suppose he must be.”

Adams stroked his chin. “Yon Cassius has a lean and hungry look, does he not?”

“I hadn’t noticed the vice president,” Jefferson replied. “I was too busy thinking she might imagine herself to be Julius Caesar to worry that he might play the part of Cassius. With all due respect to Shakespeare, Mr. Adams, we can only hope Mrs. Pitypander’s drama will prove more a comedy than a tragedy.”

Adams sniffed at the screen. “Hard experience has taught me to always keep a watchful eye on the vice president, and I’m quite sure there’s something amiss with this one. He’s a mountebank if ever I saw one.”

The caption at the bottom of the screen identified the incoming vice president as Tony Sartini. He was a good-looking man overall, most likely in his late thirties, with hooded eyes that suggested a certain seductive sleaziness common to some grasping politicians. His most distinguishing feature was a large Roman nose, which curved like a vulture’s beak.

“Ah, I see we are getting yet another Italian in the bargain,” said Adams, continuing to rant. “No doubt a double-dealing agent of the Pope, descended from the murderous Machiavelli himself!”

Jefferson smiled. “Machiavelli is he now, and no longer Cassius? Has Mr. Sartini improved so quickly in your estimation? I think you risk being unfair to the fellow, Mr. Adams. In fact, we know practically nothing about either of them. The election was so close that some have described her victory as an accident.”

“Hmm, yes, in that immodest pink garb, she looks every inch an accident,” Adams said. “And, Heaven knows, accidents happen in the electoral college.” He looked accusingly at Jefferson. “Don’t they?”

Jefferson held his tongue, hard as it was to do. He would not be baited into yet another pointless quarrel about whether he or Adams should have won the vitriolic presidential election of 1800. In the end, Jefferson and his Republicans had triumphed, and that was that. Would the old curmudgeon ever get over the Federalists’ stinging defeat?

Not in this afterlife, Jefferson knew. Adams nursed ancient grudges like newborn babies.

“Ah, she’s about to speak,” Adams said. “Let’s listen.”

Pitypander tiptoed up to the podium, glanced at the teleprompter, and yanked on the microphone. She set forth her sweeping plan to remake America.

“My fellow Americans, as I promised you in my campaign, as part of my Better America plan, we will immediately institute my policy of guaranteeing not just the pursuit of happiness but happiness itself, to one and all. To accomplish that, we must streamline all levels of government, including the states, which I fully expect to be our biggest obstacle.”

Her coat billowed as another powerful gust blew through.

“Some governors have already announced their intention to block my proposals. Well, I have news for them: I’ve always thought fifty states are way too many. Who can remember the names of so many places? Iowa, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana—so many I’s, and they all sound alike. And don’t get me started on the state capitals. Heck, memorizing them all drove me nuts when I was in school. So, as our first order of business, we’ll abolish the states and replace them with six new regional administrative units, each to be led by an appointee of my choosing. This will give us a modern, united, efficient government, like the ones they have in Europe.”

Jefferson dropped the remote, his mouth agape. He turned to Adams. “Abolish the states, did she say, in the name of efficiency, to guarantee happiness and bring us a European-style government? Is this woman mad or profoundly ignorant?”

Adams pulled his waistcoat tight around his chest. “Mad or ignorant? Why not both? The two infirmities are frequent bedfellows.”

Jefferson’s brow knotted up. “So, her remedy for slow government is fast government. Sir, the most efficient government is a dictatorship!” He pointed an accusing finger at Adams. “Is this where your notions about Federalism and monarchy have led us—back to dictatorship and tyranny?”

“Pffft! Stuff and nonsense,” Adams roared. “I accept no blame for her views. No Federalist would advocate eliminating the states. Without states, how can federalism exist? Abolish Massachusetts? I think not! Not while I have a breath left in my...well, I mean...” He stopped, looked down in dismay at his translucent torso, and pursed his lips. “I mean, not while I can do anything to stop it.”

“On that point, at least, we are wholly agreed,” said Jefferson. “Abolish my beloved Virginia? God forbid it. Centralizing power

cannot unite a vast nation such as ours. It can only foster the country's dismemberment by drawing power away from the people. Does she know nothing about our founding principles?"

"It would seem not. If she knows them, she has no respect for them—or us."

"That, most likely, is because she knows us not, nor the smallest particle of our famous history," said Jefferson.

The living understood so little about the past. History had fallen on hard times, abused and misunderstood like a ragged beggar who, though once a figure of some importance, had lost his place in the world.

The new president droned on for several minutes more and seemed poised to rattle on for a full hour despite the cold, but the two ghosts had been chilled enough by Mrs. Pitypander herself and could bear no more.

"It is well that we witnessed this travesty," Adams said in a low tone, with the gravity of an undertaker. "No wonder the country is in such deplorable condition. Every president they elect is worse than the last. Incredibly, this woman exceeds even Diebold. True, he was a shameless, self-dealing swindler, but he knew himself to be so. Mrs. Pitypander, in contrast, adamantly believes that she possesses a high-minded and unyielding virtue. What she calls reforms will wreck the country in a trice. We are duty-bound to report this calamitous development to the Council."

Jefferson thought about how that would be received. Convening the Council of White House Ghosts to challenge a president's fitness for office was an almost unprecedented step. It could lead to nearly anything. "What do you suppose they might do about her?"

Before Adams could answer, a rustle came from the other side of the room. They froze.

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The Secret Service agent had awoken. Yawning, the man looked up and stared back at them in wonder and alarm.

The agent rubbed his eyes. “Potusgeists? Nah, can’t be.” He observed them for a few more seconds and then grabbed for his phone and pointed its camera at them.

At once, the two shadowy figures exited through the wall.