

# THE KING'S GAME

---

SAMPLE

THE KING'S GAME

BOOK TWO

RICHARD LIGHT

COVER PHOTOGRAPHY

GARY SOLES, BRECKENRIDGE, COLORADO

R7L PUBLISHING

Copyright © 2025 by Richard Light

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

This is a work of fiction. Unless otherwise indicated, all the names, characters, businesses, places, events and incidents in this book are either the product of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

For more information email: [rlight7@icloud.com](mailto:rlight7@icloud.com)

ISBN (hardcover): 978-2-8384-2687-0

ISBN (ebook): 978-2-8245-0126-0

ISBN (paperback): 978-2-2737-0425-0

R7L Publishing

## CHAPTER 4

“What’s going on? You’re traveling again?” Dave asked as he walked into the bedroom. Jessica dropped her bag on the bed tossing clothes in a sequence she had practiced since she had taken the job.

“Stefan called and said I had to go back to Portland while he’s in strategy meetings with the county.”

“What time’s your flight?” Dave sighed.

“4:30, what’s the problem?” Jessica gave an incredulous scowl. How could he not understand how important her job was?

“You’re going alone?” Dave asked.

“Yes, he trusts me. I have done most of the work in Portland and he’s letting me finish it. What’s the issue?” Jessica asked. She stood staring at him, a black lace combination of bra and panties dangling in her hand.

“There’s no issue,” Dave answered. He sat back in the bedroom chair and sighed as he stared up at the ceiling.

“Dave, I love you but you need to be more independent. You need a job. Or something. Sitting around doing nothing with Mark is ridiculous. At least you still ride your bike.” Jessica stared down at him waiting for a response. His focus shifted towards the window avoiding the insult in her eyes. “I don’t have time to argue with you,” she continued as she closed the carryon. “You’ll never get it. You and Mark chose to do things the way you want. Maybe you could start another project. Lots of people are still building. Seriously, I love you but I just don’t get it. I don’t understand how you can do nothing.”

Dave shrugged. He had no defense. “See? That’s what I mean. You can’t even communicate

with me,” she scowled. “You know I’m right but you know what? We’re not going to agree on this. So, there’s no point in discussing it.”

Jessica picked up her things and stormed out of the room as Dave slunk into his chair. *I love you, but...*, he thought to himself, *She says that a lot.*

Jessica fumed as she backed out of the garage. “Fucking asshole,” she muttered, “he doesn’t get it at all. I work my ass off. I have worked hard to get this. Important people listen to me. He just won’t ever get it. Mark is the problem. If he would just play by the rules, they’d still be building. He’s a shit example. We need more housing. Why can’t he just suck it up and build what the county needs?”

She drove the 40 minutes to the airport, continuing to fume as she pulled into the covered longterm lot near the terminal. “People know I have my shit together,” she muttered.

“Back so soon, Mrs. Stewart?” the ticket counter clerk asked as Jessica entered her information into the kiosk.

“Yes. How are you today, Marilyn?” Jessica asked, reading the clerk’s name tag.

“I am well, checking any bags?”

“No.”

“You are all set, Gate A4. Have a lovely time in Portland.”

“Thank you, Marilyn,” Jessica smiled as she organized the boarding pass on her phone. Walking quickly towards a small security station at Concourse A, she kept her eyes forward, acutely aware when someone noticed her. She felt put-together and proud of it. *I feel like he’s beneath me*, she thought. It made her shudder. How could it have come to this? Why did reality take so long to reveal itself? He was wasting her time. Something told her she had better act now. There was no more room for hope, no more waiting.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked as she sat down at a corner stool facing out into the terminal.

“A glass of white wine and a menu,” Jessica smiled up at him. He had a cute smile. Something to distract her.

*Sorry, I love you*, a text said. Jessica sighed as she stared at the screen. Dave needed to wait. She was in no hurry to let him off the hook so easily.

“Long day already?” the bartender asked as he set a menu next to her.

“Yes.” His timing was good. She pushed her phone to the side and flipped open the menu. The bartender lingered as she chose. “Could I have the Thai salad?”

“Certainly, Entrée or Half size?”

“Half, and probably another glass of wine,” she said as looked back at her phone hoping it would stay silent. *He has no idea how to make me happy*, she thought. Jessica impatiently tapped a straw on the bar stewing about Dave. She realized the meaning of what she was doing. Something pent up inside of her was screaming to get out. Dropping the straw, she straightened up her posture and glanced around at the other people. They all seemed happy to be going somewhere. The wine was beginning to work, melting away the problem with every sip.

*Where are you?* read a message from Stefan.

*Usual airport bar*

*See you here. I left at 2:45*

*Thought you weren't coming,* she replied.

*Changed plans, I'll pick you up.*

She could easily forget about her fight with Dave now. Time with Stefan did things for her Dave could never understand. He got her. He cherished her value; what she brought to the Foundation. He had faith in her. He was someone to look up to and admire. It had been so long since she felt that for Dave. Even when he was building and making a lot of money, all he was doing was working and riding that stupid bike. There was no fight in him, no excitement, just productivity. Productivity and training. Training for what?

The business class seat felt welcoming as she spread out her notes in front of her. Another text popped up, *I love you. See you soon and have a good flight.* Jessica punched in a heart response. That should placate him. The plane couldn't get off the ground fast enough. There was something about the wheels leaving the ground. Once they locked, the melancholy anchoring her in place always melted away.

As the seats filled an elderly, well-dressed woman sat down smiling the warning she was ready to talk. Jessica buried her head deeper in her notes trying to avoid contact. As the crew readied the plane for departure, Jessica clutched her notes closer and focused on the dry, dead grass of early November as it rushed by.

The woman next to her had found a target in the man across the aisle. Jessica felt safe for now. With the wheels tucked up, the plane banked northwest. She dropped the seat tray; another beacon put out that she was busy. The pilot announced the two-hour flight time as the woman continued to chat up the man across the aisle. Jessica stretched back in her seat, feeling relieved. Her eyes flitted between her laptop and searching out the window for something far below. Something to make her mind wander to a happier, less conflicted place.

"That's a beautiful engagement ring dear," the woman said as her frail finger touched the diamond.

Jessica looked for the man across the aisle. He was gone. He had fled for the bathroom just as Jessica began to relax. She smiled at the woman. "Thank you," she responded.

"Are you traveling for work?" the woman asked. Her eyes lit up as she waited for Jessica's response.

"I am," Jessica replied hesitantly. "And you?" As she asked, she realized she had broken the seal. She was stuck, committed.

The woman spent the next 20 minutes reminiscing through the beverage service; the secrets she held, repeating frequently how few people knew the information she guarded. A fresh set of ears gave a renewed sense of purpose to her old stories. Where was the man across the aisle?

By this time Jessica had resigned herself to the conversation. Her attempts to turn back towards work as the woman paused to think about her next words were cut as memories flash

flooded again and again. As the woman's fragmented recounts became more disjointed, she redirected. "What is it you do for work dear?" she asked, gently placing her hand on Jessica's arm. Her eager eyes looked up into Jessica's, waiting patiently.

"I work for a Boulder-based non-profit," Jessica replied. "I am the Personal Assistant of the Executive Director and Founder. We are sort of a PR firm but only work with municipalities and counties not big companies. We teach them how to communicate and organize ballot initiatives as well as plan how they can get ordinances and laws passed that may be hot-button issues."

"Do you work with Stefan Wunderlich?"

"I do. Do you know him?" Jessica asked.

"Estelle, his Grandmother, is a close friend. We donate every year. I think she has mentioned you," the woman responded.

"Has she?" Jessica blushed.

"Is your name Jessica?" the woman beamed.

"It is. And you are?" Jessica asked.

"Oh my, all that talking and we never introduced each other. I am Genevieve Simmons." The woman reached out her hand. Jessica responded in kind. "That ring, Jessica, is just beautiful. What does your husband do?"

"He is a developer. Well, he was a developer. He and his brother-in-law had a building company. They are taking a break or something. I am not really sure how to explain what he does now. He says he invests." Jessica glanced away from Genevieve trying to hide her anxiety regarding Dave.

"It's OK, dear. He'll come around. They always do." Genevieve excused herself while the seatbelt sign was off. Jessica stared down at her ring wondering why she wore it. Why was she still with him? Would her parents care if she divorced? They cared about her happiness more than he did. She was sure of that. They would support her; they always had. She could turn to them. They were always the best sounding boards for her life, for her marriage.

Genevieve returned, trailed by the missing man across the aisle. Jessica focused on the screen in front of her hoping to get a chance to prepare. The reprieve held thanks to the man's renewed entrapment until the plane started its descent.

"Are you traveling alone, Jessica?" Genevieve asked.

"I am," she lied. It wasn't a full lie; more like a lie of omission. She didn't know how people in Boulder would think about a married woman and Stefan spending so much time together in a far-off city. It felt natural to want to control the image, to hope for the best by leaving out the details they didn't need to know.

"Stefan must put a lot of trust in you to send you alone to Portland. Estelle was right. You are his number one," Genevieve smiled. Jessica blushed as she turned to focus her thoughts out the window.

"Are you going to Portland?" Jessica asked.

"I have a connection," Genevieve replied. "I am going to Seattle." Jessica held in her relief.

The thought of she and Stefan bumping into Estelle at a restaurant was too much to worry about. Portland was theirs. Their refuge.

As the plane taxied to the terminal she gathered her things ready to make a break for the door. All she had to do was grab the carryon jammed into the overhead two rows up. Once inside the concourse, Jessica darted into the bathroom to avoid any more conversation with Genevieve. She would most likely see her at the Annual Gala. That would be enough. After straightening her skirt and checking her makeup she walked towards the exit to Stefan waiting at the curb.

"I sat next to Genevieve Simmons on the plane," she said as she got into the car.

Stefan looked confused. "I guess she is a friend of Gram?" he replied. "I don't think I know her. She knows so many people."

"She seemed to know her pretty well. She said Estelle told her you thought I was your *Number One*," Jessica grinned.

"You are," Stefan replied reaching across the center console to take her hand. Their eyes met briefly as his fingers touched her ring. His focus wandered back to the road as he navigated by memory to their hotel. The valet was ready for them when they pulled up and the rain began to ease. Stefan walked Jessica to her room down the hall from his.

---

Jessica rolled over. "God that was amazing," she whispered as the morning sun peaked through the blinds.

"Yeah, amazing," Stefan smiled. "You are amazing," he said as his fingers brushed the hair away from her eyes. He sank into the bed fixing his gaze on her. Her eyes darted back and forth searching his thoughts.

"I love you. You make me so happy," she whispered as she tucked in closer. "When can we finally be together?"

"I love you, too," Stefan replied. He lay back in the bed and stared up at the ceiling. "We need to wait. I don't want to start something we have to explain. Not now."

"When?" Jessica asked. "Why would we have to explain?"

"Soon," Stefan paused continuing to stare upward. He was thinking, planning. Jessica knew this look on his face too well. "Jess," he said after a long silence, "I am going to run for Senate."

"Oh my God! Why didn't you tell me?" Jessica's face lit up.

"It's been in the back of my mind for a while. I think it is time," he confided.

"What about the Foundation? I could run it for you," Jessica was shaking with excitement.

"Hold on. I have other plans for you," he paused. "I mean us, I have plans for us. That's why I have been so hesitant. I am sorry I had to keep this from you."

"What? It doesn't matter; this is so exciting! Oh my God I am freaking out. This is great! You are going to win." Jessica jumped up wrapping herself in the top sheet. "What is your plan for me?" She bounced back on to the bed staring eagerly into his eyes.

“You are coming with me to Washington when I win,” he shouted triumphantly.

“Shhh!,” she scolded, “the walls.” She began pacing back and forth, her mind spinning with ideas. Stopping cold, her expression grew serious. “Oh my God, I have to divorce Dave now.”

“Hold on,” responded Stefan. “We need to plan this out. It wouldn’t look right if my Campaign Manager suddenly divorced her husband during the campaign.” Jessica dropped into a chair in the corner.

“Campaign Manager,” she smiled across the room. He seemed so far away laying there in the bed grinning at her. She wanted to get up and dive into the sheets again. Something sobering anchored her to the chair.

“We will be together, Jess. We just need to get through the campaign. Don’t divorce him yet. I need you,” Stefan confided. “We will be together. I love you.”

Jessica breathed a long, slow breath as she stood. “I understand. This is going to work. It has to work. You have done so much for people already. You can do amazing things as a Senator.” She found her place again next to him. Her fingernails ran along his back the way he liked. Stefan watched her; it felt joyful to finally tell her. He found contentment knowing she was his as he lay there basking in her gentle affections.

“We can do amazing things,” Stefan smiled as he ran his hand around her waste pulling her on top of him. His cellphone rang. “We can take local ideas to Washington. We can make policy that will help the entire country. And...we can work with people around the globe. We will have the power to influence on an international scale. We can’t do any of that from Boulder. There are places who need us and need progress. You and me Jess, we’ll be able to make a much needed impact.”

Stefan’s phone continued to vibrate on the nightstand. “It’s the office,” he sighed as he gently pushed Jessica to the side. “This is Stefan,” he answered impatiently, fully aware of who was calling him.

“Stefan, it’s Deb.”

“What’s going on?” he asked, his hand held up to Jessica reminding her to stay quiet.

“The Mayor wants to know when you’ll be back. He’s been calling nonstop.” Stefan paused a few seconds and sat up in the bed. “Hasn’t he called you? Stefan?” Deb continued. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes, I heard you. I asked him to call you when I am out of town,” Stefan replied. “Tell him I’ll be back in a few days and make a meeting with him. Tell him I have something I need to discuss in private.”

## CHAPTER 5

“Let’s start doing the early morning Sanitas hikes again,” Mark suggested. “It’ll be good for us.”

“Sure,” Dave replied. “It’ll be good for you, you mean. I get enough exercise.”

Mark glared at Dave. “I can bring the thermal along,” he replied ignoring the jab. “We can watch the herd on the north meadow. If they’re still there...” Mark thought about the terrain, the ridge line running to the west. To the north, the slope dropped off enough to make an acrophobic cringe. It was especially nerving in the dark. There, the elk clung to the pitch happily eating away at the grass free from humans. Many old-time hunters knew of it but not the obedient hikers who stayed on the trail. An old cabin sat on top giving homeless men a hideout from the heat in the summer months. It would be quiet this time of year, too cold and too much of an effort to stumble backpacks of their possessions so far up.

“Alright, I’m going to head home, see you at 3:00 am?” Dave asked as he pulled himself out of his chair.

“Sounds good. This will be good. We haven’t done it in a while,” Mark replied.

Settling into bed after telling the girls their bedtime stories, Mark looked at Sarah. She knew he was up to something.

“You’re not hunting in the morning,” Sarah accused.

“No, Dave and I are going to get some exercise. Like we used to,” he answered. Sarah gave him her suspicious, knowing stare.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” she said. Mark’s eyes sheepishly agreed but his head knew anything could happen. “I’m not bailing you out. What time are you going?”

“3:00 am” he revealed.

Sarah groaned. "Be quiet when you leave and don't wake up the girls. Ruffie will want to go out."

"I'll be quiet. We will be back before you leave for school," he promised.

Mark awoke at 1:00 am forcing himself back to sleep. The anticipation awakened him again at 2:15. He slid quietly out of bed. Ruffus looked up and slapped his tail on the bed a few times before repositioning himself in the warmth of Mark's spot. He slipped quietly into the kitchen putting on the light over the sink. His phone buzzed as he made coffee.

*I'm headed over,* Dave's text read.

Dave was waiting outside the garage as the door rolled up overhead. The air felt heavy and wet, a forewarning of the coming winter. A full moon peaked out behind scattered clouds. Mark handed Dave a travel mug.

"You think we'll need headlamps?" Dave asked.

"We should bring them," Mark replied. "It's pretty bright out but you never know. I kind of like them on red."

"Did you bring the thermal?" Dave asked.

"It's in the pack," Mark grinned.

They drove through the edge of the city where crowded neighborhoods met the foothills. A tight canyon road wound past Mount Sanitas leading up to a trailhead designed for an easy ascent. Tall lodgepole pines grew tightly together; their canopy greedily soaking up the sun, snuffing out the hopes of growing underbrush. It was all just woods in purgatory patiently waiting for fire. To the north, meadows and dark lush flora clung to the slopes. The elk found their home there.

At a switchback in the road, Mark pulled into a small trailhead lot. The quiet of 3:30 a.m. was haunting. Humans had no business walking around in the wild dark at that hour. Wasting no time, they quietly shut the truck doors and slipped into the shadows of the forest.

"We should keep really quiet," Dave whispered.

"Yeah, I agree," Mark replied.

Dave relished being out in the woods before sunrise. Waking before dawn, loading his rifle and stepping into an unfamiliar environment grounded him. From an early age, his father had taught him to move carefully in the dark to slowly meld into the surrounding. His instincts told him to move purposefully; his nerves reminded him to stop and look behind him every once in a while.

"We should probably stick to the trail," Mark whispered.

"Yeah, probably. I hate this trail though. It goes back and forth so much it seems like it goes nowhere," Dave complained. "I know it's designed for trail running but it's mental torture to hike."

"Screw this thing then, let's just go up," Mark relented.

Dave didn't have to be told again as he cut off the trail stepping lightly on the silent bed of pine needles. Their progress improve with each step upward.

"Let's slow down a bit so when we watch the herd we won't be too sweaty. It's going to be cold while we're sitting," Mark suggested. He looked like the effort was about as much as he could take.

"OK," Dave conceded, barely sweating. Slowing their pace, they kept heading straight up. As they neared the edge of a small meadow, the trail joined their trajectory again giving them a firm surface.

Mark held up his hand quietly asking Dave to stop as he scanned the thermal across a small meadow to their right. A few mule deer stared at them, alerted by the unnatural sounds they made. Leaving the trail again, they walked towards the moonlit glow of the abandoned cabin.

From their perspective the cabin look as though it were perched on the edge of a cliff. A star-riddled sky filled the backdrop as the moon cast intense shadows against the forest floor. With no hunting pressure to push the elk out, the resident herd frequented the pitch below moving only occasionally in search of better grass.

Mark and Dave approached quietly conscious of their footsteps. Dave peaked through a crack in a boarded up window for signs of movement or the passed out shape of a transient man. Gesturing to Mark it was all clear, they settled on the remains of a patio littered with cigarette butts and broken glass.

Below the ridge the feeding herd silently chewed their way uphill towards the cabin. They're backs glowed in the moonlight.

"What time is it?" Dave whispered.

Mark handed Dave the thermal scope and looked at his watch. "4:20," he answered.

"Looks like a good-sized herd," Dave said.

"Yeah," Mark whispered. "There are a few decent bulls."

"I see a Five-by-Five," Dave whispered. "Another few spikes over to the east. A Four-by in the middle. A lot of cows. This herd isn't that big, maybe 30, 40?"

"What's that over by that log?" Mark asked.

Dave adjusted the scope. "Looks like a carcass. Hard to tell. Wanna go down there?"

"No, let's stay up here," Mark cautioned. "If they move to the lower part, we'll go down. We don't want to make them run."

The glow of sunrise bled into the night as a soft breeze moved the dead grass around their feet. The herd began to move down and away.

"They probably have our scent now," Mark whispered. "There's water lower, they'll head for that as the sun comes up."

"I'm going to go down and check that carcass out," Dave whispered. "I'll go around the north side and meet you at the lower trailhead."

"Be careful. Try not to spook them or fall," Mark replied.

"It'll be OK," Dave reassured him. "I'll go slip in there behind that rock. I just want to get a closer look."

"That's probably alright," Mark agreed. "I'll go get the truck and meet you below. Don't be too long but don't hurry too much and get hurt. That would be bad."

"I won't," Dave said. Mark watched as Dave crept down across a small flat in the meadow. The herd didn't seem to notice or care that he was getting closer. A few of the cows stared twitching their ears in his direction. Mark turned to descend the trail as Dave neared the carcass. He halved the distance to the trailhead cutting the switchbacks the same they had climbed, rejoining it as he neared the truck.

As he came out of the woods into the parking lot, the sound of an idling car caught his attention. A Parks and Open Space jeep sat next to his truck with its window down. "How's it going?" the ranger asked.

"Good, you?" Mark replied.

"Are you alone?" the ranger asked.

"I am," Mark lied.

"Did you sign in?" he asked.

"Oh no, I forgot. Sorry," Mark apologized, "it was pretty early when I headed up. Wasn't thinking."

"Make sure you sign-in in the future. We need to make sure we keep track of people up there. It's for your safety."

"I understand," Mark replied. "I appreciate you guys looking out for us."

The ranger glanced up at Mark from the clipboard he was holding. "You were up there alone?" he asked again.

"I was," Mark repeated the lie. "Getting some exercise before work."

"What do you do for work?" the Ranger asked.

"I used to be in construction but now I do some investing," Mark answered. He suddenly recalled Paul's lectures about answering law enforcement questions. It was beginning to feel like he was being dragged into an inquisition. At this point, he had no choice. Becoming defensive now would raise suspicions and Dave was still up there.

The ranger made some notes on the clipboard. "What is your name?"

"Mark. Mark Sullivan."

Looking over his glasses the he seemed to be committing Mark's face to memory as he scribbled his name on the sign-in list. "Just put the approximate time you started and time now to sign out," he said handing over the clipboard.

Mark thought for a moment as he estimated the hour he and Dave arrived. As he handed the list back to the ranger, he smiled as genuinely as he could as he climbed in the truck. These county and city trails with all of their rules, regulations and policing were something he could gladly forget. There was nothing like taking the path of a narrow game trail in the middle of nowhere following the decisions of the creatures who carved them over generations. That was nature to him.

The populated cities had their well-planned, designated paths with a distinct essence of dog piss. It seemed necessary to keep the citizens under a certain amount of control for their own safety. Out of their element of pavement and consistency, they needed order. It was better for them. *The ranger is just doing his job*, he thought.

To Mark, he would never understand the motivation to take a job so limited. Was it the early retirement and pension that motivated them? The idea of freedom in a few decades? It seemed like a system of indentured servitude designed to take your best years then release you into a world where there were nothing but memories of work and weekends. Maybe they did notable things on their own in the little spare time they had. Maybe they had hobbies they could manifest into something. They all retired relatively young, just past the grey area between youth and old age. It was better than a corporate job in that respect. The corporate world whipped you until the end taking everything, forgetting you before sunrise the Monday after your retirement. Why did everyone seem to retire on a Friday?

Mark waved to the ranger as he pulled out of the parking lot. The ranger's eyes fell back onto the sign-in sheet seemingly satisfied he had done his job. His authority had been expressed; a good way to finish a late night shift.

The sun was over the horizon as he twisted down the canyon hoping Dave would be at the lower trailhead by the time he arrived. He thought about his brother-in-law; about his life. Something was going wrong. Dave was young, almost 38. He had money saved and invested that could last the rest of his life if he managed it well. He wasn't wealthy; but it was adequate. The only thing that distinguished them was children. Dave wanted them; Jessica hesitated. For what? What was the wait about? As he rounded the last turn, he saw him walking up the canyon. Dave jumped into the truck as he slowed.

"There's an inquisitive ranger at the trailhead checking if people are signing in and out," Dave said as he put on his seatbelt. "Got scolded for not signing in so they think I was in and out of the lower one."

"There's one up top too," Mark laughed. "*I* got scolded. What was the deal with the carcass?"

"Someone shot it," Dave reported. "There was an entry wound in the ribs."

"No shit? They dressed it out?" Mark asked.

"They only took the hinds and the back straps," Dave answered. "There were definitely cut marks on it. That thing hasn't been up there long. Maybe a couple days or so. You can see where the birds are after it. And the coyotes are pulling pieces off."

"It'll be mostly picked apart in a week. At least it won't have a chance to rot and stink like roadkill," Mark said. "Looks like we aren't the only ones hunting. I can't imagine someone would fire a gun during daylight back there. There's no way. Too many people on the trail."

"Had to be at night," Dave replied. "It's not something I'd do. Not sure I'd even call that hunting. More like just plinking live creatures."

"It's poaching," Mark sighed. "I'll never understand the motivation for that."

“Maybe they need the meat,” Dave replied. Mark thought about it. Even in the obvious wealth of Boulder County there were hungry people willing to risk their freedom for available food.

“Maybe,” Mark conceded. He thought about the cost of an off-record gun, a suppressor, obtaining ammunition. Would a hungry person who needed to poach for survival have the means to buy all of that in the underground market? Maybe it was a hidden gun that made it through the search. He knew he was rationalizing virtue into a poacher but the thoughts had implanted themselves into his head and they were hard to shake out. He wanted to think the best of humanity in general; then to refine it down to the individual.

---

“Daddy!” Becca screamed as Mark entered the garage door. “Where were you?”

“Uncle Dave and I went for an early hike to get some exercise. Are you all ready for school?”

“Yup,” Becca answered.

“Where are Mommy and Katie?” Mark asked as he bent down to hug her.

“They’re upstairs. Is Uncle Dave here?” she asked as Dave walked in the door.

“Good morning, Becca,” he said. She ran to him grasping his legs in a strong hug. He picked her up carrying her around the room like a baby. She loved it, giggling herself silly until Sarah and Katie came downstairs ready for school.

“OK, Becca get your bag we need to go,” Sarah announced. “Hi Dave. How was the hike?”

“Good, pretty normal,” he answered.

Mark returned to the kitchen just as Sarah and the girls were leaving, following them into the garage for hugs goodbye. Dave fell into a chair.

“Gun violence still makes headlines since we bravely passed gun reform. We feel safer but guns are still making it to the streets. Find your local firearms drop box and drop off your undocumented gun before you become a statistic. It’s a crime. You can’t wait to make us safer,” the public service announcement ran across the screen.

“Oh Christ, what are you watching?” Mark said as he dropped into his chair.

“I just turned it on,” Dave replied.

“Didn’t mention the murder rates did they? Ten years and no improvement. It’s actually worse,” Mark muttered. “Guns deaths haven’t dropped and blunt force trauma and knives have gone up. So I guess if you really are worried about guns, it might look like an improvement.”

“They don’t care about that,” Dave replied. “I mean, I don’t think they care at all as long they get what they want.”

“What do they want?” Mark asked. “They got almost everything they wanted in the gun laws. And remember, it was a fucking Republican who came up with that one. And a Republican appointed Supreme Court Justice who made the deciding vote to interpret the meaning of ‘mili-

tia' and 'regulate'. At the national level it has been a Republican chipping away at firearms for the last 50 years. The Democrats make local laws, they haven't done hardly anything nationally for a while other than try to classify certain guns as military and scary. They all just follow the votes and voters are reactive. You can't blame them for that; it's in our nature to look for quick fixes. The faster we can feel safe, we'll do anything. Fuck the consequences."

"It was a matter of time," Dave sighed. "Personal protection isn't in the Constitution, ability to take game isn't either. The Second Amendment is based in war. Remember? *Militia*? It says nothing about personal responsibility or protecting yourself. That is an assumption people wanted to make. They were worried about fighting monarchs not populist statism where the people democratically screw each other."

Mark nodded in agreement as he stared at the news channel. He was too tired to push the conversation to its inevitable conclusion where he and Dave grumbled about politicians feeling hopeless to do anything other than complain.

"What are you making on the lathe in the garage?" Dave asked.

"New barrel for that Glock frame I have. I sort of want it around with all of the break-ins."

"You'll wind up in prison if you use it," Dave warned. "Shit, you'll wind up in prison if a robber tells the cops you pointed it at him. He'll become an informant. Why do you need a new barrel anyway?"

"I want a treaded one for the suppressor," Mark replied. Dave didn't react. He wasn't surprised Mark was working on a gun. But if discovered, it would put him federal prison for at least 5 years and cost him tens of thousands in fines and attorney's fees. Paul would cut him a break to defend him but what could he really do besides try to get a reduced sentence. Undocumented guns were easy convictions.

"Does Sarah know you're doing that?" Dave asked.

Mark smiled, "Of course she does."

---

Jessica walked into Stefan's office. He motioned for her to sit as he finished up a call.

"That was the Mayor. He would like for us to meet him for lunch in a half hour at Bistro 10." Stefan looked her up and down. She was dressed well enough.

"I love that place," she replied.

"There are always connected people there," Stefan said. "They'll be important to us."

Jessica loved it when Stefan used 'us' referring to the Foundation and now the campaign. He knew how to attend to her and make her feel special. Dave used to be like that. He used try harder; something had changed. He didn't look after her the way he used to. He seemed distracted like he was always sidestepping. It seemed like he put more effort into avoiding her than trying to understand what she felt, what she needed. Maybe their relationship was too comfortable. It didn't matter. The divorce would come soon enough. Stefan would win the elec-

tion and they would move to DC. She would finally get to a place she deserved to be in life, unshackled from Colorado.

Stefan stopped his Audi in front of the restaurant. The Valet reached in to take Jessica's hand as Stefan stepped out of the car. He casually looked her up and down again as he followed her in the front door, waved straight past waiting patrons. Jessica went ahead, following the Maître D' towards a table in the back with a stunning view of the Flatirons. Stefan paused, he leaned down to gently take the hand of an elderly woman seated nearby. Her husband stood to shake his hand, patting him encouragingly on the shoulder. They were major donors and friends of Estelle. Jessica watched him graciously accept an envelope.

"Jessica!" Mayor Eckles exclaimed as he stood to greet her. "You look beautiful as ever. Good thing you're married. You'd probably distract Stefan too much if you weren't." The Mayor pulled out her chair taking a long, unrepentant look at the curve of her hips as she sat. "Look at him over there; people love him."

"It is so nice of you to invite us," Jessica smiled.

"It is my pleasure," the Mayor replied as he stood again to shake Stefan's hand.

"Mayor, thank you for the invitation," Stefan said. "We'd never get a reservation here in a half hour without you."

"There are certain privileges I can't pass up," the Mayor grinned. "I am just glad you are back in town. How was Portland?"

"We are coming along," Stefan beamed proudly. "They have some amazing programs they are contemplating. Just have to get it refined."

"I'm sure you'll get it done," the Mayor replied as he slipped a glance at Jessica's blouse.

"You never know until they vote," Stefan continued. "I guess it's part of the game. Honestly the tension in not knowing excites me. Sometimes you think you have them and they betray you." Jessica sipped her water watching. She saw the same adoration in every elected official who met with Stefan. He could take almost any controversial new law and make voters embrace it. His modesty was calculated. It was all part of it. She understood Stefan well enough to know what he was doing.

Uniformity and consistency of purpose was their underlying strategy. It gave the voters of cities across the west a frame of reference and acceptance to try new ideas knowing other cities agreed. People weren't sedentary in location nor their thoughts. They moved for work and better opportunities; they watched how other communities acted. An orderliness of local laws as they move to from place to place gave them comfort. It evened the appeal of progressive cities as they competed for business and jobs with more and better corporate incentives.

The time for the federal government to hold grant money over local governments was past. People were unified and informed better now than ever. Local laws could be pushed upward from grassroots efforts. Washington was too on-again, off-again for local and state politics. The money for local government was in the corporations and attracting the right ones brought life to a community.

The idea for the Firearm Safety Act began locally, gaining momentum as other like-minded cities adopted their versions of it. Eventually it made its way to Washington where it was heavily fought and passed. The Supreme Court finally had the courage to interpret the Second Amendment as it had been written. *A well-regulated Militia being necessary to the security of a free State*, was enough. The Constitution gives the government the ability to regulate a militia. Ordinary citizens were never intended to form militias on their own, those were gangs. The federal government, administering through the states, would take the responsibility to call them up for defense; to be trained as needed. That was where federal domestic spending still had its power. *The right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed*. The people still had access to their arms. In keeping with the nature of armies, holding firearms in a secure location was no different than the military keeping them in their armories. The certified gun ranges were the armories of the people. Whether the meaning of the Amendment was for self-defense and private control over firearms, was now a mostly forgotten point. The law was passed and it would take something monumental to change that.

"So, Jessica, how is that brother-in-law of yours?" the Mayor asked. "Still hate me?"

"Mark? I am not sure if he qualifies as a brother-in-law," she scowled. "He's OK. He's not doing too much right now. My husband, Dave, and he have a new exercise plan that is pretty annoying." She had lost the composure Stefan expected of her. Jessica regained herself, desperately feeling like she needed to soften her comment.

"How so?" the Mayor asked.

"This morning they went up Sanitas around 4 o'clock. They like to do it every time Mark starts feeling out of shape. It is really obnoxious," Jessica complained.

"Why the hell would anyone do that?" laughed the Mayor.

"Excuse me a moment," Stefan interrupted, appearing uncomfortable with the conversation. He left the table to greet another long-time donor across the room.

Jessica watched Stefan as the Mayor continued to question her. Ever the politician, he concealed his animosity for Mark with feigned interest. "That land deal he and I were fighting over was good for the county and the city," the Mayor reminisced. "He had to understand. Not every project deserves approval. It's just the way things work. You have to make the tough and sometimes unpopular choices in leadership. But he and that lawyer..."

"I know," Jessica replied, "he has a hot temper sometimes and he is conniving. With Paul Marshall around, he's worse. It was better for them to sell. He just doesn't understand the importance of planning. You can't build houses wherever you want."

"Well, I hope there are no hard feelings," the Mayor replied. "We took it on the chin and over-spent but it's done. We accepted that reality and moved on. It's nice to know that you understand us and our position. He never said anything about it to you did he? How they did it?"

"No," Jessica said as she sipped her water, "they were quiet. When Mark is up to something he is always quiet. Just watch him. He'll be at Paul's office a lot. It's the clue he is doing something underhanded. Sometimes I don't think he will even let my husband in on it." Her eyes

focused on Stefan as the Mayor's passed across her cleavage. She knew what she meant to the Mayor. She could handle him. His lechery was more contrived than practiced. It would take a desperate woman to let him touch her. With all his power, his physical attributes were enough to neutralize his appeal.

Jessica felt more pride than she had in years with her connection to Stefan. He had important ideas for the state and, to a larger extent, the country. Although he hadn't spoken much about it until now, she knew he had political ambitions. She wasn't surprised that he had chosen to bypass local government and go right for the U.S. Senate. The Republican was weak. Stefan was well known and well connected. He didn't need to move out of obscurity through a lesser post. He would also garner support from out of state through their work in Portland, Seattle and the San Francisco Bay area. Spending all of the campaign funds they would received was going to be a challenge.

"You know," the Mayor continued, "Mark Sullivan has proven how insignificant he was to the local economy. Almost no one recalls he even built a house around here. He is the past as far as development is concerned. Hope he is enjoying his pile of money. I certainly don't see him doing anything good with it."

"He only cares about himself," Jessica replied returning her attention back to the Mayor. "Mark can't be counted on to do anything for anyone unless something is in it for him."

"Are you saying that he'll never understand why we were at odds?" the Mayor asked. "I always thought we could get through to him. Thought he would come around."

"He would do exactly what he did. Walk away or find a way around things to suit himself," Jessica replied indignantly.

"That seems like criminal tendencies," the Mayor replied.

"I would not be surprised if he has broken a lot of laws," she replied.

The Mayor grinned like a kid about to spill some dirt. He leaned in quietly and whispered, "Now that I know where you stand, I have to tell you. We have a file on him. We know all the regulations he has bypassed or gotten that asshole attorney of his to push us on." The Mayor leaned back grinning proudly at Jessica. She wasn't a threat to the secrets. If Stefan trusted her, so could he.

"If he ever tries to start building again," the Mayor leaned in, "we will make it hell on him."

"Excuse me, Mayor," Stefan interrupted as he slipped back into his chair. "Thank you for inviting us. I should be more conscientious and thoughtful of your time."

"No apologies are necessary. Jessica and I have been having a nice chat. Without wasting any time," the Mayor winked, "I hear you may have some new ambitions."

Stefan glared at Jessica who threw up her hands in defense. How could he know? Was he talking about the Senate run or something unrelated? Stefan remained quiet, shrugging off the comment. The Mayor was outwardly impressed with himself as he waited for them to give up the secret.

“What are you talking about?” Stefan asked quietly, his eyes searching for eavesdroppers at nearby tables.

The Mayor leaned in again, “Don’t worry. None of these people know and most aren’t smart enough to care. At least for now...Senate?” he whispered. Jessica flinched at the Mayor’s revelation hoping nobody near had heard. She was finding herself more and more sensitive to potential reputation issues in the last few days. They had a campaign to win, not one to defend.

“Estelle,” Stefan whispered.

## CHAPTER 6

The gate resisted and finally gave in and groaned as he pushed through. The gardener looked up from a dug up sprinkler head to see who it was. The shrubs he manicured over the gate deterred most people, forcing them to the driveway callbox. Stefan gave the gardener a cordial nod as he stepped around a pile of upturned sod.

“Hi Gram,” he greeted solemnly as he pushed through the front door.

“Stefan, sweetheart, why do you go through there?” she complained. Her small frame struggled up from her chair upsetting the cat.

“I like it. Sorry, it bothers you?” he answered in boyish submission. Estelle subdued her rebuttal avoiding the impulse to tease him. Stefan could be sensitive. Whatever she requested of him he would do, respecting the path she laid out completely.

A hug reassured him as she took his hand. The house was opulent and dated. It pleased him that his grandparents hadn’t changed. It was a reminder of his childhood greeting him with love and affection; securing him in a space he still felt safe to be vulnerable. Hesitating outside the shrine of his mother’s room, he remembered. His father was unaware of her illness and more than likely his birth.

Estelle and his grandfather Frederick raised him since he was 5 under their family name. He never asked why; he never cared to know. With them came a peer group of older, established local patricians. As he went through private tutoring then to university, Stefan barely ventured away from the house apart from accompanying his grandparents to social gatherings and fundraisers.

Estelle and Frederick were attorneys by education with a substantial nest egg of family money to fall back on. As a lifelong occupation, the toil of law had no necessity other than to serve their personal interests. They hoped Stefan would follow and establish himself in the

profession. It felt predestined but it was not to be. Graduating with a degree in Political Science, he chose to pursue an MBA. Although unsocial with most of his university peers, he grew into a natural and influential leader of admirable causes at home. People interested in progressive ideals found in him the energy and focus to make up for the constant ephemeral distractions of their busy lives. With all of its wealth, there was little to consider fake about Boulder and its social life. Their intentions were true. Everything was exactly as it appeared.

"It is so nice of you to come by," Estelle said as she poured him a glass of lemon infused spring water. "Here, you need to hydrate."

"It is nice to see you, Gram," he sighed as he sipped. "I haven't been able to come over for a while. We've been busy..."

"You do important work, darling," Estelle interrupted.

He smiled. Her compliments were plentiful and meaningful. She was his biggest fan and best connection when forming the Foundation. With her network, he was assured an unquestionable amount of success. No one saw the possibilities he had in him better than she, as a duo their determination was unmatched.

"I saw the Mayor yesterday," he blurted out impatiently.

"How is he? I asked him over for tea the other day," Estelle smiled. "He was such a delight. Sometimes he is so funny."

"He seems to know what you and I talked about. In confidence..." Stefan replied.

"What was that?" Estelle asked.

Stefan couldn't tell if she was bluffing or maybe starting to lose her memory. Maybe she was relying on her hearing again. Her expression didn't give in either way. She seemed lucid but there was room for doubt. Estelle stood with her glass half-tipped, shaking from mild tremors. He tenderly took the glass from her hand.

"The campaign," he said.

"Oh that," Estelle feigned innocence as she turned to rummage in the pantry, "Was that hush-hush?"

"We discussed it," he replied. "It was supposed to be kept a secret until later. Maybe after Christmas. Certainly after the Gala."

"I am sorry, dear. My mind is just not as clear as it once was," Estelle apologized. "Next time please make a point of being more direct."

"I thought I *was* being direct," Stefan replied irritably. "I remember asking you to keep it quiet until we had a plan put together."

"I don't recall that. I thought you were excited. What is the harm of letting the Mayor know? He is a dear family friend and a fabulous ally." Estelle stared at him impatiently over her glasses. He couldn't fight with her. She had a talent of turning any argument to her advantage. There was no winning; and it wasn't about winning. It was about whether to tell her anything; to relinquish control of his thoughts and ideas to her. He had to feel like he trusted her even as she aged and he became more convinced that she wasn't losing her faculties. And Frederick was

never around, always off hidden away somewhere. He was no help to Stefan. She was all he had.

"It probably doesn't matter," he relented. "Can we just keep it quiet until Christmas? Maybe I will announce then. A soft announcement."

"All worked up for nothing," Estelle scolded. "In the end, none of this conversation or people knowing now or later will matter. You will win and go off to Washington. I will be here alone with Frederick and the cat." She hugged him patting him as he lay his head against her chest. At 43, her comforting embrace still soothed.

"Now that it's settled we need to make plans for your announcement," Estelle grinned. "You will do it at the Gala. What did you say? A soft announcement? That will never do."

"I was thinking about the Gala," Stefan replied, "but I think later would be better. It seems out of place with the Foundation. Like it will conflict."

"I don't think you should wait too long. What are you thinking? At the New Year's Festival?"

"I was," he replied.

"That's no good. You know I don't like repeating myself, you need to do it at the Gala. It will help with donations. People are ready to write checks and they will write bigger ones if you announce your candidacy," she lectured. "Work it into your presentation then you can give a proper speech at the Festival. We'll make sure of that. The Mayor will give you his time for a speech. He'll stand up with you and support you."

"Before we get too far into this, I have chosen Jessica as my Campaign Manager," Stefan revealed.

"Really? Are you sure about that? Isn't she married to that Dave, whatever his name is? Sorry, I don't recall their last name. Just Jessica. Did she take his name?" Estelle stopped and slipped momentarily off into her thoughts. "Her brother-in-law is that Mark Sullivan," she continued. "I hear he is an ultra right-winger. Some sort of free capitalist radical. I think he's an anarchist. That's what the Mayor calls him."

"He goes to the Gala every year," Stefan reassured her. "He's harmless to us and at this point he is irrelevant to the community. He just sits around looking at his money; whatever's left of it. I think he started going to the Gala because he liked to push around the Planning Commission and he knows they hate him. Regardless, he's done in this county."

"I think he goes to the Gala because Jessica is part of his family," Estelle replied. "That's my problem with her."

"He's been going longer than she has worked for me," Stefan countered.

He was ready to drop the subject before he and Estelle got worked up in an argument. He couldn't bear watching her dramatically clutching at her heart when something bothered her. It was all a show, although he was convinced one day she would drop dead in front of him her right hand clawing desperately at her blouse. Vivid nightmares of the scene haunted his childhood.

"It makes no difference," Stefan reassured her. "He is irrelevant. Insignificant. And Jessica is fully on my side. I trust her completely. Besides, she won't be part of that family for long."

The comment perked up Estelle's attention. She gave him a knowing look full of affected surprise. Her Stefan could charm any women in the city. It had taken him a long time to submit to the attention he received. As his income and popularity grew, so did his list of women. They were all the same. They walked into his life looking for excitement then eventually shifted to wanting children and a house and private school and all the things that went with the life. He did not.

They held on as long as they could, feigning their own dedication to career but ultimately they married someone who would put them in a big house with an imported car. Stefan was right to be scared away. Whenever a woman got too interested in him and instigated *the talk*, he fled back to the safety of the Foundation and his grandparents. The phrase *where is this going? what are we?* bent him over in guilt and neurosis. Suspicious of women's motives, he convinced himself they were all out to entrap him. There had been enough precedents.

"How do you know Jessica is leaving?" she asked.

"She has confided in me," Stefan replied.

"And you have nothing to hide," said Estelle, her eyes fixated on him waiting for a sign of weakness.

"I have nothing to hide," he replied, his eyes remained fixed on Estelle who continued to challenged him. He broke contact first. "She is more than qualified to run the campaign and judging from her work at the Foundation, she is loyal."

"Well you just keep your hands to yourself," Estelle warned suspiciously. The thought of another scandal to manage cursed her soul.

"Gram, would you stop?" he plead. "There's nobody at church who would care and I have bigger things to worry about than taking someone's used up wife."

"Ugh," she gasped, "the way you talk sometimes. You don't say things like that in public, do you?" He shook his head. She was not convinced. Her revulsion waned slowly. Estelle stared at Stefan over her shoulder as she went to retrieve her ringing cellphone. She waited for him to submit himself to her scorn but he remained steadfast, committed to his silence. Her expression shifted to concern as she listened to a voicemail.

"Turn on the TV," she snapped.

The local news had their van parked a few blocks away. Yellow police tape surrounded the Mayor's house cordoning off an area being searched by dogs and their handlers. The news anchor pulled her hair back from the wind while she described how the Mayor had been shot from a considerable distance. The police were now organizing a search for a reported bomb. The Mayor's current condition was unknown, assumed serious.

Estelle clutched her heart and fell into the sofa. Stefan jumped to her side laying his hand on her head. Realizing she was in mild shock, he lifted her feet and placed a few pillows underneath. The color inched its way back into her face. Estelle's drama could make him doubt his own good health.

"Could you get me some water," she whimpered.

Stefan brought her a glass of ice water from the purifier making sure to fill it to one inch below the rim just as she liked it. Estelle propped herself up taking the glass with two hands. She shook as she sipped.

"You should go," she murmured.

"Where?" he asked.

"Go to the hospital. He may need you."

"Will you be alright?" Stefan asked.

"I will. Go," she begged.

Stefan placed his hand on her shoulder, patting her gently. He looked towards the door as she laid her icy cold fingers on his hand. With a slight nudge she directed him to leave as she set the glass on the end table and slid lower into the sofa. Stefan pushed the auto-start on his Audi as he quietly latched the front door.

The drive was blur of thoughts until the sight of news vans at one of the older hospitals caught his attention. As he dodged around camera crews, a security guard waved him towards a side entrance. "Mr. Wunderlich" he called, "the Mayor has asked me to take you to his room."

"Thank you. How is he?" Stefan replied.

"He seems OK for a man who was just shot," the guard reassured. "Follow me."

The guard led him to an elevator away from the chattering of what seemed to be hundreds of voices. "Why did they bring him here?"

"Excuse me?" asked the guard.

"To this hospital. Why not the newer one?" Stefan asked.

"I don't know, Sir," the guard replied, apologizing. "It's close to his house, maybe?"

Before Stefan could ask another question, the elevator doors parted throwing him into the middle of an impossible scene of concerned, chatty Boulderites. The guard led him through the crowd as people reached out to hug him and offer their sympathy. The tear-streaked cheeks intensified as he got closer to the door. Stefan took a deep breath before pushing his way in anxious as to what lay behind.

The Mayor was reclined in his hospital bed his head turned away. He was alone. "Took you long enough," he groaned.

"I came right over," Stefan replied.

The Mayor turned slowly to face Stefan. His eyes were heavy, his breathing seemed labored. He reached a hand for Stefan letting it fall theatrically onto the bed rail and began to laugh.

Stefan sank into a chair. "So, you are alright?"

"I am but don't let the circus know," the Mayor replied gesturing towards the door.

"What happened? Did you really get shot?" Stefan asked.

"I did," the Mayor pulled up the hospital gown covering his left arm revealing a bandaged shoulder. "Hurt like hell."

"Can't you go home?" Stefan asked. "That doesn't look like much of a wound."

"The Doctor wants me to stay the night because of my heart. As far as this is concerned," he said pointing to his shoulder, "you know what to do."

"I have an idea," Stefan smiled. "What are your thoughts?"

"Well, we have the authority from the Feds as local leaders to conduct random searches, you know that already. We should figure out who we want to add to the list Chief Thomas creates. We'll do it the way we did the last time. I know he's been itching to knock on some doors."

"You meant *knock down some doors*," Stefan replied.

"Either way. He'll have a list and I have a list," the Mayor grimaced as his shoulder shot a surge of pain down his arm. "Anyone you would like to add I don't know about?"

"I have a few although most live out in the county. The Sheriff won't go along with it. When is he supposed to retire?" Stefan replied.

"Not soon enough. Incumbency is a bitch and he knows how to keep himself electable," the Mayor grumbled.

"It's not a bitch for you," Stefan smiled.

The Mayor sank back into his bed sighing up at the ceiling. His eyes twitched back and forth crafting a plan. "Let's make sure we keep the circus out there performing for a while. The doctor is on board. He legally can't say anything about my condition. Let them make up their own minds. The more silent he remains the more they'll wonder if I am about to die. I made sure to ask him to say nothing and try to look concerned."

"We haven't even talked about what happened. You realize that?" Stefan said.

"Business first," the Mayor laughed. His smile quickly faded as a nurse entered. As the door closed, he caught a few concerned stares from people outside. The nurse smiled at Stefan whose own demeanor had suddenly turned solemn. "How are you, Mayor?" she asked. "I just need to take your temperature then I will leave you alone to rest."

As the nurse waved the thermometer over his forehead, the Mayor adjusted himself in his bed letting out a little groan. "Are you feeling OK? What's your pain level?" she asked.

"Oh I don't know, maybe a 6 or 7," he sighed.

"I will see if the doctor can up your meds. It'll help you rest," she replied.

"Thank you," he whispered. As she turned to leave, his eyes locked on her ass. "I need to stick around here a little longer," he laughed quietly as the door latched.

Stefan moved his chair closer, "So, what happened?"

"I was in the yard with the dog and I felt this sting on my shoulder. It was enough to buckle my knees. I just dropped. It felt like it was burning. I couldn't hear the shot. Maybe I was too distracted. Maybe the guy used a silencer."

"Any idea who would do this?" Stefan asked.

"Take your pick. Could be a lot of people," the Mayor thought. "Shit, it could be a whole conspiracy of people trying to get at me. Obviously, what we need to focus on is the gun. Where the fuck did someone get their hands on a high-powered rifle? And get it out in the open?"

"They're still out there," Stefan warned. "We got most of them but you know there are a lot

of wackos who stashed them before the seizure. It could have come from out of state. The whole country is full of these nut jobs even still.”

“Well, we are going to do some house hunting on the locals nuts. It’s been long enough since the last one; and we can use this. The citizens of Boulder will be behind it and certainly the press. If we can’t get it done in the county, we’ll make a show of it here. It will pressure the Sheriff to get off his ass.” The Mayor sat up in his bed stretching forward to relieve his lower back. “It doesn’t matter who did it. Someone is going to jail. We’ll let public opinion convicted whoever we want. He doesn’t have to be the shooter. When we find a gun on one of our checks, that fucker is going to jail for a long time.”

Stefan leaned in, “Remember, Alex has been itching to get a real gun possession conviction not some minor paperwork fuck up. I will have my team send him an email saying we have an idea who it might have been and we are ready to work with him in the background. We just need some proof.”

“Good, if we can get some momentum on this, it will help your campaign,” the Mayor replied, “part of the platform. Alex is a good prosecutor, he’ll get something going you can use.”

“I know,” Stefan agreed as he stood up to leave. “Feel better. I will come back tomorrow morning and let you know what we come up with.”

“Just come to the house,” the Mayor said. “I will be out of here early.”

---

A text message vibrated Stefan’s phone just before 6:00 am. It was the Mayor letting him know he was home. Stefan rolled out of bed and into the shower stopping to examine his physique in the mirror.

*I’m on the way*, he texted back. Stefan walked out into the cold morning slowly making his way to the Mayor’s house. A police cruiser idled in the drive. As Stefan approached, the officer rolled down his window, “Good morning, Mr. Wunderlich.” Stefan gave the officer a wave as he slipped around the house to the rear entrance.

The Mayor met Stefan at the door handing him a cup of coffee and motioning for him to sit. “Want some breakfast? What do you want?” he asked.

“Sure, whatever you have,” Stefan replied.

“I have a refrigerator full of shit from the neighbors. The only thing I don’t have is a fucking lasagna. I think somebody has to be dead to get one of those.” The mayor pulled a large glass baking dish out of the refrigerator. “We’ll eat this. It’s some sort of an egg casserole thing with kale or spinach. I hope it’s spinach.” Stefan obliged the mayor’s choice.

After the second plate came out of the microwave, the Mayor sat down with Stefan. He looked like nothing had happened. “Slipped out of there around 1:00 am,” he laughed.

“I am surprised you woke up so early,” Stefan replied.

“I was lying on my ass all day yesterday. I probably won’t sleep well for a week.” The Mayor

pushed a one-page list of names towards Stefan. "Here it is," he said, "the short-list of potential suspects in the city."

Stefan picked up the paper scanning the list. His brow furrowed as he went through it pausing on a few of the names to consider whether they had murder in them. He picked up a pen placing checkmarks beside some of the names and handed it back.

The Mayor silently reviewed the checked names appearing unsatisfied. "I think we are thinking the same, Stefan. This list won't cut it. The people of this town are generally law-abiding especially when it comes to guns. Most are scared shitless of them."

Stefan remained silent. He knew the Mayor liked the stage. He would never make the mistake of appearing to be his equal even in private. Making checkmarks next to names served to ask the Mayor if he agreed with him, not to assert his opinion. Mayor Eckles reached for the pen and crossed off two of the names handing the list back to Stefan.

"Williams and Carter shouldn't even be on this list. I am surprised you would put checkmarks next to them. Sometimes I wonder if you are just fucking with me," the Mayor protested.

"There was something that stood out about them but you're right," Stefan agreed. He often wondered if the Mayor thought his subservience was sincere or whether he felt threatened. When two politically powerful men come together, there is no equality. One always has to submit something to the other.

"Mark Sullivan should be on the list," the Mayor moaned. "This is something you can work on in the Senate. There is still too much red tape between us and the Feds in influencing gun checks outside our immediate jurisdictions. Maybe something along the lines of the County Commissioners influence, or rather, creating a process to get the Sheriff to comply or cooperate. *Cooperate* is the word we should be using."

"The Sheriff likes to tiptoe around these things," Stefan interjected.

"He does. He is always trying to avoid the perception of being political. Out in the county, there is a different breed of citizens. We own the city, there's no problem here. If I were to try and pressure the Sheriff, he'd be the first one to insinuate that I am on a witch hunt and would tell me to go fuck myself. He would use those words. He's still angry with me over too many things."

"I have a friend within the FBI in Denver," Stefan replied. "I'll tip him off."

"Wait on that," the Mayor's eyes darted back and forth plotting. "How much can you trust Jessica?"

"I believe she is completely trustworthy," Stefan replied.

"I believe you are wrong," the Mayor interrupted. "If something happens to her brother-in-law right away... What I mean is, these guys on the list are going to get hit soon with an inspection. She might know that we had something to do with it. So might Sullivan. That asshole is suspicious of us, of me anyway. Let's keep him out in the county, unaware for now." The Mayor leaned back in his chair smiling, "He will hear about the inspections. That gun range is a gossip hub. We can make sure the old man and Kristian talk it up like it's just in town."

Stefan squirmed in his chair hearing the name. He hated hearing the word, Kristian. That's all the kid was to him. A word. "Are you sure you want to involve him?" he asked. "I am not sure he would be useful."

"Yes," the Mayor replied, "he is useful and let's assume he doesn't know how brilliant his father is." The Mayor glared at Stefan who sank lower in his chair. The Mayor attempted to control his conniving smile while he watched Stefan's anxiety level rise. Stefan was a great strategist, but he had better learn to play to the death if he was going win an election.

"I am not sure what that will accomplish," Stefan replied. "Are you assuming Mark Sullivan is the one who shot you? Why bring him up?"

"I am not assuming anything. Everyone knows I dislike him after he fucked with us," the Mayor recalled. "We need to keep our hands clean and see if we can push some buttons to get him on the county list; get his house searched. If nothing else, disrupting his life again is good revenge."

Stefan was coming around to what the Mayor was saying. Sitting a little more assertively in his chair, his mood improved. He hated Mark Sullivan. The fact that he was sleeping with Sullivan's sister-in-law gave him an assured dose of vengeance. Dave wasn't much of a man. Certainly not enough to keep his wife interested. Even with the added bonus of revenge, Jessica was worth it. She would leave her husband for him because he was better. It was something he enjoyed proving every time he pulled Jessica's blouse over her head.

"What if the Police Department finds the shooter?" Stefan asked.

The Mayor turned away from the window to face Stefan. "This police force has a tough time solving anything. You know that. High profile murders, arson? If they don't have undeniable proof who did it, they will wait. They'll act like they are investigating then put out a report saying some shit like 'if further evidence presents itself, we will reopen the case but at this time it's closed pending additional information' or or some other bullshit. What they want is a happy city and I agree. A happy, safe feeling city with no scary crime."

"I understand," Stefan interrupted. "The quicker the city gets quiet again, the better."

"Exactly," the Mayor smiled. "Like I was saying, this town lives on a status quo of outdoor activities and money, let's keep the ugly sense of reality elsewhere. Now, let's see what we can get from Kristian. See what he hears. We can't waste this opportunity."