

SECRET ROOM

A Novel

By

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Note on the Text:

Secret Room is based on three historical facts:

- *In 1863, Mary Todd Lincoln held eight seances in the White House to contact Willie, her son who died in the White House at age eleven.*
- *On April 23rd, 1863, Abraham Lincoln attended one of these séances.**
- *In 1791, a hundred years before this séance, the streets of Washington D.C. were secretly designed to form giant occult symbols which still exist today.*

**Lincoln Day by Day*, Earl Schenk Miers, ed.

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EPILOGUE - *June, 2200*

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*"Where does the devil play?" Momma asked.
"In hell," said her son with a grin.
"No," Momma said, "the devil plays
where little boys let him in."*

-- Old Nursery Rhyme

PROLOGUE

The White House

March, 1865



1. *On the Verge*

Abraham Lincoln wandered through the White House alone at night, pretending that he wasn't on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The war was almost over and the country was in shambles. Both the North and the South blamed Lincoln for the deaths of their brothers, father, sons, uncles, cousins. Everyone hated him.

But there was something else on his mind.

Three months ago his son Willie had died of consumption. Now Lincoln spent much of his time trying to keep the world from knowing that his grieving high society wife was going out of her mind.

He slipped out alone onto the balcony, lit a cigar and looked up at the splay of stars. He could hear his wife sobbing from their bedroom. There was no way he was going in there. If he tried to console her again, it would be for the tenth time that day. He couldn't let her drag him down to where she kept her thoughts, in the bowels of hell and grief and death. He needed to keep himself strong. He needed to protect his own sanity so he could clean up the terrible mess he'd made of the country.

But tomorrow night was another story. Tomorrow night he had to watch her very carefully, because her grief would be objectified.

Mary had invited someone to the White House who would make things so much worse.

Yep, can't wait, Abe thought, blowing a smoke ring around the Moon, for that goddamn dwarf.

2. A Fraud in the White House

The next evening at twilight, a one-armed lamp-lighter named Shemp McGonagle lit the gas street lamp in front of the White House. Chewing on a wad of tobacco, he peered through the fence at the White House lawn with its rows of hedges, its bird baths, lawn ornaments and statuaries. A second story window in the White House, which had been brightly illuminated, suddenly went dark.

Curious, he bit off some more chew and leaned closer, shoving his face between the cold iron bars of the fence.

He stared at the window. He knew when lights went on and off in the White House; it was his job. The lights in that room never went out this early.

He might have been more interested if he gave a rat's ass about Lincoln or his crazy wife. As far as Shemp was concerned, that hick inbred bastard had destroyed the country. Freed slaves were every goddamned place you looked, infesting the Capitol like maggots on a half-dead dog. Shemp might lose his job to some nigger, one with two good arms who would do the same job for less than half the pay.

Picturing Lincoln roasting in hell, Shemp spat a wad of chew towards the White House. It sailed over the dark grass and splashed into a bird bath, polluting the clear water with a turgid spiral of murky black.

The room the lamplighter had been watching was Lincoln's study. The interior was dark save for a candle in the middle of a large, circular table. Around the table an unlikely group were seated and holding hands. Mary Todd Lincoln was still dressed in black, although Willie had died almost three months before. To her left was her pastor, the Reverend Julius Michaelmas, a man of the cloth big enough to be a circus wrestler. Next to him was Reverend Hastings, elderly, frail, but alert.

The President was seated at Mary's right, holding her hand. Next to him was Gwynne their nanny, and next to her was Secretary of State Hays, Lincoln's closest friend. Next to Hays, completing the circle, was the medium, the notorious Madame Sarouche.

Madame, a dwarfish invalid, was seated in a wheelchair. She wore a maroon silk gown and looked elegant and graceful despite her crippled legs. Although past middle age, she had childlike eyes and a look of innocence she had carefully cultivated through the years to offset any

careless indication she might give off that she was not a seer but rather a businesswoman whose business was to divest the wealthy of excess funds.

At the door behind her stood Crane, her valet, whose job was to carry her to and from the homes of wealthy suckers.

Lincoln felt the pressure of Mary's shoe against his. At Madame's request, they were all touching toes to prove that neither the feet nor hands of anyone present were responsible for any manifestations to come.

Sarouche was breathing deeply. Everyone's eyes were closed, except for Lincoln, Hayes and Crane. As the medium began to moan faintly, Lincoln arched an eyebrow at Hays. Lincoln knew another grifter when he saw one. He'd spent years manipulating the public with his own cornpone act. He wanted nothing better than to expose Sarouche for what she was in front of Mary and the others and put an end to the whole sordid business.

But the situation was delicate. Mary's high society friends swore by the diminutive medium's abilities. And if Abe didn't humor Mary, she might become hysterical and lock herself in her room. Again. He didn't need that now. Too much time had already been wasted walking on eggshells around her and her goddamn fragile psyche.

Still, he loved her, and loved poor Willie's soul as much as anything he'd ever loved. But he wouldn't be able to sit back while a charlatan desecrated his son's memory. If Sarouche trotted out some shoddy semblance of Willie made of canvas and cheesecloth, he'd bolt out of his seat, grab her wheelchair and shove her midget arse out into Pennsylvania Avenue. He wondered how many war widows out there had been bilked by Sarouche and her sideshow act. His blood boiled thinking about it. He tried to calm himself in the candlelit dark. *Patience. Do this for Mary.*

Lincoln began grinding his teeth to keep himself quiet as Sarouche, her eyes closed, moaned louder.

Suddenly her boyish voice rose, moaned, wavered. Her head went back, moving strangely. Her mouth opened. She began gagging and her eyes went back in her head.

Here it comes, Lincoln thought. Goddamn bitch.

Behind Sarouche, crouching unseen in the dark, Crane pumped a small black bellows at the candle. The flame extinguished. Her cue.

Sarouche emitted an ear-splitting scream. It was a chilling effect which not only set the tone, but distracted everybody from what was really going on. For under the cloak of darkness, Sarouche immediately went to

work. Far from being a cripple, she slid her dextrous bare foot out of the hinged back of her metal-toed shoe.

At the same time, Crane slid a bell under her chair. Her toes curled around the bell and shook it, the bell tinkling as her tiny voice broke into a strangled moan. The moan cued Crane, who pulled two black rods from his jacket. Attached to the rods was a carefully prepared swath of cheesecloth covered with phosphorous paint. The glowing apparition, appearing seemingly out of nowhere, floated and bobbed delicately over the table.

Everyone gasped at the eerie apparition. Save Lincoln and Hays, who eyed each other grimly.

Sarouche gyrated and moaned louder.

Gazing at the eerie spectre, Mary Todd squeezed Abe's hand, trembled, sobbed, "Willie! It's my Willie!"

Madame, feeling the delicious rush a grifter feels when humiliating a helpless mark, tinkled the bell again with her foot, the sound accompanying the movements of the cheesecloth. The performance was so outrageous, so preposterous that it was much easier to believe it was real than imagine the gall and audacity necessary to fake it.

Lincoln had already agreed to let Hays make the first move. Hays watched the floating spirit, guessed how the trick was done. He was about to snatch the cloth and expose Sarouche as a fraud, when he saw Mary's face faintly illuminated by the phosphorus glow. Tears were streaming from her eyes uplifted in gratitude to God. Hays shifted uneasily in his chair, decided to wait.

Madame's moans transformed into something more artful and strange as the Cheesecloth Ghost, looking like nothing from this earth, slowly danced around the perimeter of the table like a supernatural fishing bobber, which in some ways it was, trying to lure and hook the contents of their pocketbooks. As the cloth swayed past them, it wafted a light breeze across their faces. To Mary, it was the breath of an angel and she whimpered. At last the grief that had torn her soul apart was healed by the gentle touch of her dead son.

Abe squeezed her hand tightly and through the shadowed light cast Hayes a look of restrained fury. Hays subtly shook his head at Abe. *No, Abe. Not yet.*

Abe sighed, nodded imperceptibly back.

Then he sniffed. As did the others. There was an unmistakable aroma in the air. *Almonds. Smoked almonds.*

Meanwhile, Crane moved unseen behind their chairs, making the ghost complete its concourse around the table. The grifters' routine was well-rehearsed. When the spirit circled around to Madame Sarouche, Crane would take both sticks in one hand, open his black bag and quickly stuff them inside, making the ghost "vanish".

But as the ghost reached Madame, it did not disappear.

Instead, the cloth kept moving, dancing to the center of the table where it stayed, slowly twisting and revolving.

Madame Sarouche continued moaning as before, but was stunned. This was the most important performance of her career. What the hell was Crane doing? And what was that smell?

The cloth began to spin faster and faster while bobbing around the center of the table. Idiot! Terrified that Crane was going to blow it, she broke off her moans and cried out in her own voice, "Enough! Begone, spirit! Begone!"

Sarouche felt Crane's hand clutch her shoulder in an urgent signal. Not his hand. His *hands*. At that moment she knew someone was on to them. The spirits were only real in the minds and hearts of her suckers. Someone must have grabbed the sticks from Crane in the dark and was about to expose her at her own game.

She must do something. Her mind raced, trying to think of a way out.

But the cheesecloth, now spinning above the center of the table, was not the only thing wrong. The room had grown cold and clammy. The atmosphere itself felt dense and unpleasant. She was dumbfounded as a circle of cold fog formed around the spinning cloth, then the circle slowly fell, like a droplet in water in slow motion, When it hit the table it rippled outward in a growing circle, touching their faces, hair and clothes with a delicate, eerie wave of coldness.

The cheesecloth, still floating, had stopped spinning. It was vibrating now, and glowing with a weirdly changing palette of unpleasant colors. It began vibrating so quickly, it became a blur, stretching, finally ripping apart in bits and chunks, scattering across the table. One shred of luminous cloth landed on Mary's shoulder. She jumped up and shrieked, trying to bat it away.

Abe grabbed the cloth from her just as another ripple of fog hit them, this one much colder. And now floating over the table was a weird pinwheel of ugly darkness wobbling like a top.

The pinwheel began hissing loudly. The others pushed their chairs back but remained seated, mesmerized as they were by the object gyrating

like a buzz saw of black electricity light. In its center Something was emerging, hatching as it were from a hideous blacklight womb, a Something being bourne from Nothing, as if space itself was ripping open over the table.

The hissing grew growing louder as it expanded, now bathing them all in a wash of dark iridescence.

Suddenly the Thing exploded from its shell in a ball of searing white light. A shock-wave of vibrations pushed them back, knocking them over chaotically, shattering the windows, blasting the curtains, throwing paintings off the walls. Mary screamed as Hayes and Lincoln jumped to their feet and were thrown backwards by an even more powerful shock-wave from the blinding fireball.

And then the Badness started.

Crane, frozen in fear, gasped as the fireball shot a scythe of light from its vortex and engulfed him in a cocoon of chattering electricity. The lightning pulled Crane into the air and over the table. He screamed as his body began spinning and twisting in a wobbling arc, his flesh contorting as he revolved faster and faster. They heard his bones being snapped and broken as his limbs were ripped out of their sockets and went crashing against the walls. Blood spewed from his mouth, nose, ears and eyes. His clothes ripped and stripped from his flesh which was by now a blue-red sack of spinning gore, his body almost unrecognizable as a human being. As if finished with him, the hissing whirlwind threw Crane with such tremendous force that his distorted body sac exploded against the wall like a balloon of blood.

Sarouche, Mary and Gwynne were screaming. The men wanted to scream but were too terrified to do so. Sarouche, beside herself, frantically jumped from her chair, abandoning her crippled act and running for the door, when another scythe of electricity shot from the fireball and spiraled around her bony neck. She gagged as the hissing fingers choked her, her face turning blue, her tongue sticking out. The electricity twisted her head to the left and right with obscene violence, suddenly twisting it all the way around until, with a wet crunch, it snapped from her neck. Her head, oozing effluvia from the neck, was levitated to the center of the fireball, which transformed into a roaring whirlwind. As the head spun, the eyes popped from the sockets attached by bloody stalks in a preposterous orgy of gore. Blood from the neck painted a splattering spiral over the table as the hair ripped like wallpaper from the scalp. Finally the vortex spit the head towards Lincoln who caught it reflexively in a tangle of hair, skull and blood. Its eyes dangling from stalks stared up at him. He threw the

head onto the table where it began spinning like a top, the glutted neck hole emptying the head of every drop of blood in a thin spray across their faces and clothes.

The vortex vibrated the room as a terrible black figure writhed in its center, showing glimpses of twisted arms, legs, long hair and eyes. A nightmarish face formed from the spiraling fog, distorting and howling in a deafening rage. The eyes of the Black Entity focused on Lincoln as it shot an arm of chattering electricity towards him, its ghostly hand grabbing his face like a vice. Lincoln struggled to free himself and in desperation overturned the table. The motion ripped the black hand from his face and he slammed against the wall.

Hayes pulled him to his feet and Lincoln yelled, "Get out! Everybody out!" Hays and Lincoln started to pull the others, frozen in shock, towards the door.

But Reverend Michaelmas stopped them, yelling over the rushing wind, "No! Do not leave! Hayes, Mr. President, hold hands! Quickly!" He grabbed Lincoln's and Mary's hands and began reciting the Lord's Prayer in a loud commanding voice. Hastings, finding a courage in himself he never knew he had, joined in, yelling the prayer loudly and forcefully even as tears streamed from his eyes at the horror materializing before them.

For now, an enormous black entity emerged from the whirlwind, its eyes staring at Lincoln, the black hole of its mouth hissing with hatred and fury beyond belief.

But their voices raised in prayer against the Entity gave them strength. Seeing the President and Hays reaching for them, the others held hands in a circle around the hideous black hurricane creature. Now they shouted the prayer along with Michaelmas, Lincoln and Hays included. They raised their voices over the roaring wind that tried to force them apart. Finishing the prayer, they began it again, yelling louder.

The words seemed to affect the Entity. The black shape began distorting and losing its form while pulsating and wobbling out of control. In truth, the black force was not affected by the prayer itself, but by the force of their wills focused through their words.

Lincoln seemed to understand it, knew it was accusing him, not through words, but through waves of feeling somehow conveyed by its powerful hateful vibrations...

Kill you!

Kill your family!

KILL YOU ALL!

A black tendril wrapped around Lincoln's neck. He flinched at the tingling cold fingers that began choking him. But he knew now that fear weakened him and strengthened It. He fought the feeling of terror and yelled the prayer with the others. The icy black fingers dissolved from his neck and the entity pulsed and screamed in frustration. Reverend Hastings, his courage and ingenuity impressive in the face of the horror, yelled over the winds to be heard, telling them to force it away from the table, towards the door of the adjoining chapel. The idea caromed from mind to mind.

The Chapel! Force it into the Chapel!

They struggled to keep their hands together as the whirlwind wrapped around their fingers trying to rip them apart. But somehow it was working, somehow yelling the prayer in unison focused their willpower and repelled the entity from them, keeping It in the center of the circle. It took all of their combined strength to move the raging whirlwind, which was obsessed with Lincoln, shooting more and more black fingers around his neck, yowling like a beast caught in a net. Lincoln's fear was replaced by disgust at the shrieking Thing trying to kill him. For now the entity screeched and moaned as if *it* was now the one being torn apart.

Reverend Michaelmas kicked open the chapel door behind him, then released Gwynne's hand. "Force it in! Push! *Push!*" The group formed a half circle against the wall and pushed forward with all of their strength, forcing the swirling beast through the doorway into the tiny Chapel.

The blackness roared as Lincoln grabbed the doorknob and struggled to shut the door on the Entity. The Thing's ghastly energy pulsed, a hundred black fingers forming around the edge of the door to pull it open, desperate to free itself. The others pounced on Lincoln and their combined strength yanked him backwards and slammed the door shut.

Perhaps because it was a chapel imbued with loving prayer over Willie their dead son that the creature was weakened in the room, its walls covered with crosses, tapestries and holy relics. The entity screamed a piercing echoing scream across dimensions which cut through their souls like chalk on a blackboard as it pounded on the door and walls with terrifying force trying to free itself. Hays and Lincoln yelled for the others to put their shoulders to the walls. They did, still yelling the prayer together, using every ounce of their strength to keep the door and walls from fissuring and cracking from the blows of the Thing inside ramming against it to get out.

Hastings ripped the crosses from his and Michaelmas' necks and wrapped them around the doorknob to the Chapel, another focused thought which strengthened their wills and weakened the creature. To their amazement, they were actually winning. The Thing's violent poundings and earsplitting yowls slowly diminished, becoming whimpering wails, ghastly cries of submission that coursed through their flesh and shook their bones with supernatural resonance. Very slowly, the poundings and cries grew weaker, finally giving out a deep moan of anguish that vibrated the entire study, a final heart-wrenching wail of defeat that shocked them all.

The weird, pathetic, pleading whine grew fainter and fainter, till at last it faded to silence.

Mary sobbed and fell into her husband's arms.

Against his will, Lincoln felt unexpected pity for whatever It was, this black entity they somehow had summoned and somehow overpowered.

Then he saw it.

Something had been sprayed in blood on the wall facing the chapel. A word sprayed from the blood wrenched from the medium's spinning corpse.

A strange word.

L'Enfant.

"The child."

3. Damage Control

The shredded bloody stumps that had been Sarouche and Crane were covered and put on ice until Lincoln and Hays could decide what to do. It was the type of situation unique to the White House and not uncommon to it: a class of events had occurred that would result in immense repercussions with the public unless it was covered up immediately.

Lincoln, Hays and his advisors huddled in one corner discussing what this could mean politically. In another corner, the religious leaders convened to discuss what it meant spiritually.

The consensus of the latter group was that if in fact the creature was trapped in the chapel by their spiritual efforts, the room must be sealed so the creature could not escape; perhaps sealing it in would eventually allow it to dissipate into the etheric plane whence it came. To accomplish the spiritual sealing of the room, they decided to use holy objects and rituals not only from the Christian tradition, but from all religions. Within hours, sacred symbolic objects were assembled and the ceremonies were conducted.

When they were finished, and they were satisfied that they had done all they could do to not only seal in the entity, but perhaps destroy it, Hayes quickly brought in an army of master carpenters. Under a vow of secrecy, the workmen labored straight through the night, sealing in the tiny chapel by reinforcing the doorway and walls with steel plates, which masons doubly reinforced with three layers of brick.

At the same time, the broken windows and blood-spattered furniture, rugs and bloody wallpaper were removed and destroyed in a cathartic bonfire on the South Lawn. While the evidence turned to ashes, the entire room was being scrubbed, disinfected, repainted and refurbished.

By sunrise the work was done. The tiny chapel was not only sealed, but was now invisible and inaccessible. Hays personally destroyed all blueprints of the White House, and replaced them with new prints in which the chapel was deleted. It was as if the room had never existed.

The word sprayed across the wall was French for "the child." He had the workmen scrub it clean with soap and hot water. In private, Hayes asked Lincoln if the word might have something to do with Willie, his

dead son. Lincoln said nothing. There was nothing to say. Whatever the word meant didn't matter. Lincoln would never discuss it again.. He wanted everyone to forget about the entire incident.

Luckily, no one would ever believe the truth anyway. Hayes fabricated a cover story for the press, that Madame Sarouche and her valet had perished when their carriage overturned, and the entire incident was quickly put to bed.

Lincoln and his wife grew closer as a result, sharing a terrible, intimate secret, and praying together now with increasing regularity and devotion.

Outside in the early morning light, Shemp the lamplighter peered through the fence at the bustle of activity in the presidential study, at the dying bonfire on the South Lawn, wondering what all the ruckus was about. He grinned, imagining Lincoln grabbing his chest with a heart attack or, even better, being attacked and eaten by his own watch dogs.

As the first light of dawn arose, Shemp opened the gas lamp in front of the White House and blew out the light.

One week later, Lincoln was shot in the back of the head.

BOOK ONE

The Present



1. *Besmirched*

There was a sweetness to her otherwise dark personality, even though she knew the girls in her class hated her. Olivia Carson and was the only daughter of Senator William Xavier Carson of Massachusetts. The girls didn't like her because she loved what they hated, and they hated what she loved. Olivia laughed at fashion and at trendy clothes and, as her chief enemy Bella put it, it showed. A 13 year old girl who rebels against a 7.9 billion dollar a year industry shows spiritual resilience, but the drawback is that she ends up dressing like an idiot. The sad fact was, there were only five anti-style categories: metal/goth, retro/ethnic, nerd/bookworm, hippie/new age or tomboy/dyke.

In Olivia's case, she chose *tomboy* as a style, or lack of it, but to the other trend-setting girls in her class, it was pure Butch. Whenever Olivia entered a room, Bella would pretend to cough while rocket-launching the word "Dyke!" around the room.

Olivia-Carson-Class-Lesbian became a standard class joke. The irony was that Olivia happened to be a hard-wired heterosexual who lusted after Daniel Riccio, the senior who played surprisingly good blues piano. Aside from her best friend Althea, Olivia never told a soul about her desire for Daniel, and the steady stream of catcalls from her wealthy classmates continued, her reputation besmirched in a stereotypical falsity.

Olivia had just punched Bella hard in the face. The girl was on the floor of the school hallway, looking up at Olivia with a bloodied nose as a crowd gathered around them.

"Butch!"

Her eyes black with hatred, Bella sprung from her haunches like a disheveled wraith and dove ignobly at Olivia, slamming her against the lockers. The two girls went at it with punches and kicks, sprawling across the floor as the jocks chanted, "Cat fight! Cat fight! Cat fight!"

Bella, who like most homophobes hated and feared her own homosexual tendencies, was out of control. Straddling Olivia she grabbed a fistful of her hair and punched her three times, her class ring ripping a bloody gash under Olivia's left eye. Olivia grabbed Bella's neck with both hands, Bella did the same and now the two were strangling each other on the floor, a two-backed she-bitch rolling through the crowd.

In the Principal's office, Bella's mother and Olivia's father sat in silence as the Principal racked up a list of the girls' transgressions. Olivia's father kept trying to get some eye contact from his daughter, but she knew it and avoided it. Ten stitches now adorning her left cheek. She'd mentally bailed from the scene the moment they sat down. Now she was staring through the window at Daniel Riccio across campus seated with a redhead. The redhead was smiling and laughing at everything he said. Olivia imagined a leather face-masked maniac jumping between them and shoving a chainsaw into the airhead's giggly mouth and twisting it around till all of her teeth were gutted out. Or an air hose shoved in her ass inflating her till she exploded.

She watched Daniel and wished that she was the one with him and not the redhead. As she watched him, Daniel's music filled her head, remembering her first time. Not the first time she'd had sex, which she had not done yet, but the first time she'd heard him play piano. Olivia was the only musical one in her unmusical family. She had been the best singer in her class since she was six, when her teacher asked her to sing that national anthem for the middle school assembly. At eight, she discovered that she could imitate the trills and vibrato of blues singers, and began making up songs and overdubbing different parts with a microphone plugged into her laptop. Now that her father was famous, her singing was getting more and more attention. But no one asked "Where did she get it from?", since everyone knew that she had been adopted at birth, from a couple who wished to be anonymous.

But the first time she heard Daniel's music, she was alone after school working on her latest "F" in art class. Ms. Gunner, the art teacher whom the jocks called Ms. Gonorrhoea, hated adolescent artists like Olivia who were inspired by dadaists and surrealists. She hated Olivia and students like her because they wanted to break every rule of composition before they learned what those rules were. For this project, for example, Olivia was supposed to do a pencil sketch of a human figure. Instead, she decided to melt a Barbie in the kiln, glue it to a canvas and was now painting flames, demons and angels around it. Imaginative, creative and rule-breaking. In other words, an F.

She was just finishing off the last demon when she heard the piano, faintly. Bluesy, soulful, evocative. She froze, listened, put down her brush and followed the distant music down the hallway to the empty school theater. From the back of the theater, she saw Daniel playing a baby grand on the bare stage. She sat in the dark unseen by him and listened.

It was then that she fell in love with Daniel Riccio. She wanted to merge her soul with his. She wanted to give herself to him. When she was ready, she wanted to have his baby. In theory, anyway. Because, as it happened, she would do none of these things with Daniel Riccio.

"Olivia, do you agree to keep at least ten yards distance between you and Bella on campus at all times?"

Olivia was sucked back to reality. She nodded at the Principal and sighed. "Sure."

As Daniel and the redhead got up and strolled into the distance, Olivia imagined herself firing a rocket launcher through the window blasting a hole through the slut's head.

The deal with the Principal, her father, Bella and her Mother was struck. Olivia came out unscathed, except for the gash on her cheek, which actually made her look even more like a dyke. On the ride home, her father brought up plastic surgery. Moody and distant, she didn't answer.

Which was unusual considering the circumstances. Most thirteen year olds would want to get closer to their father if, like William Carson, the week before he had been elected President of the United States.

2. Covert Sex

A threnody of muffled banging reverberated from a hidden corner of the White House. It was a late-night sound heard at the close of every political administration, the furtive banging of hurried, covert sex by White House staffers.

It was generally security guards, who knew where the cameras were, banging their willing counterparts in camera-free corners, culverts, cupboards and closets. Secretaries were now called "P.A.'s", or Personal Assistants, a linguistic virus transmitted to D.C. in the roaring eighties by the trendy open sore of Hollywood. So sneaking off with a P.A. into a few camera-free feet of the capitol was informally called "P.A. penetration".

This seasonal clamor of coitus was understandable in terms of basic human nature. When a new party was elected, it was *fait de complit* that the new President would fire the old White House staff. So before they were booted out, the White House boys and girls couldn't help sneaking off at the first opportunity to burn a hot, indelible memory in their brains by having hurried, rabbitlike sex in the cubbyholes of arguably the most famous House in history.

Late late Thursday night the sound in question came from Jerry Lewis, one of the gate security guards, who was banging Cynthia, the oldest of the White House P.A.s.

Since college, Jerry's friends had made fun of him for the two things that made him unique: having the same name as an old comedian, and for his unusual predilection to have sex with women over sixty. At a bar, the big joke was, "Hey, I think that old bag wants to be one of Jerry's Kids."

It was no different with Cynthia, a fifty-eight year old redhead whose husband Renard had left her eight years ago for a younger and prettier version of herself. Cynthia accepted Jerry's proposition after hesitating for five seconds, a duration during which she visualized the snide postcard Renard and his young redhead had sent from their ski vacation in Banff.

Now Jerry and Cynthia were making love standing up in the kitchen cooler, their muffled groans made visible by rhythmic bursts of steam from their lips and nostrils.

Cynthia would indeed be fired due to the new administration cleaning house, but Jerry Lewis would not. This was unfortunate for Jerry who, in that same kitchen cooler, would later be butchered to pieces, not

unlike the slabs of meat hanging next to them, swinging in time with their cool, covert copulation.

3. *The Bloody Inauguration*

The day before her father was sworn in, Olivia was looking at her face in the mirror, singing along with the Ella Fitzgerald-Louis Armstrong sessions. Her best friend Althea, a black girl who viewed the world through the roiling prism of MTV, sat on the bed, Olivia's cat Larry in her lap.

"Larry, don't listen to this senior citizen shit," she said, holding her hands over Olivia's cat's ears.

"Shut up," Olivia said, putting makeup over her bruised eye. She turned to show Althea. "I'm going to look like an idiot tomorrow."

It was true. The makeup wasn't covering the bruise. Althea tossed Larry onto the pillow, stood up and grabbed Olivia's blush brush. "problem.

INSERT SECTION ON LIV'S SCAR AND HAVING TO DRESS
FORMALLY FOR THE INAUGURATION CEREMONY.

2. *The White House Blueprints*

A change of political parties sometimes called for a major remodeling of the White House. For just as the new president wanted to leave his imprint upon policy, the First Lady wanted to leave her imprint upon the building itself. Remodeling meant revising the White House blueprints, and this was a national security issue.

Since the 1800's, access to White House blueprints required a high security clearance, since the prints had obvious value to anyone with an inclination towards assassinating the President. This problem was addressed in secret session in the 1800's. As a result, a program named Schedule B1510 was set in motion, requiring the drafting of false, or decoy, prints. These decoys were then placed in the official White House architectural files in the event of espionage. The real blueprints, however, were filed with other secret documents elsewhere, later finding a permanent home amid the billion-plus classified documents filed in the Pentagon.

When the White House was gutted for major renovations during the Truman Administration, it was this spiral of decoy blueprints which allowed the tiny, walled-in chapel at the center of the White House residency to remain undiscovered.

When a new array of top secret programs began in the fifties and sixties, the newly-formed NSA revamped Schedule B1510, renaming it *Project Almond*, mandating an even more elaborate trail of counterfeit blueprints. Soon, old false prints were regularly replaced by new false prints, further complicated by the constant remodeling of different sections of the White House with each new administration.

As a young architect fresh out of Harvard School of Design, Charles Edgar Gurning became one of the six original junior architects designing decoy prints for Project Almond. Each worked separately in a sub-level of the Pentagon redesigning different parts of the prints according to new specs sent to them on a bi-monthly basis by a project coordinator known only by an internal email address and the number PA-Administrator-6422.

In 2001, when someone crashed an airplane or launched a missile into one of the Pentagon's five sides, PA-Administrator-6422 had been killed. To Gurning's surprise, he was promoted to his post.

Unfortunately, unbeknownst to anyone including himself, Gurning was going insane. For years Gurning had felt the jabs of hot pins and needles in his thighs and buttocks at precisely eight p.m. every evening, lasting for about ten minutes of intense pain. At first he assumed these were his aging nerve endings doing something temporary and anomalous to his lower extremities. Gradually the jabs became more focused and were accompanied by blasts of light in his head. He wondered if he had a goddamn brain tumor. Going to a doctor was out of the question. If it ever leaked out that he might be ill, he would lose his high paying, high security job and never work again.

But he did not have a tumor. These pinpricks and flashes of light were classic symptoms of encroaching schizophrenia. Gurning officially became insane when he had an epiphany and suddenly knew that these jabs and light blasts were being beamed at him externally by someone attempting to control his mind. Since Gurning now headed a Top Secret project, he assumed that this was a security test to gauge his strength in case he was kidnapped by foreign agents and tortured. This, combined with the fear of losing his job, is why Gurning kept his mouth shut about the whole damn thing.

After seven years of enduring these pricks and flashes, the insane architect in charge of Project Almond had a second epiphany. One night, the lights and needles merged in his malfunctioning mind into the image a large, glowing, airborne parasite. A sort of giant luminous mosquito, visible only to himself because, he assumed, he was a man whose senses were uniquely sensitive to other ephemeral dimensions invisibly intersecting ours. Every night he watched as ghostlike insects flew through the walls, landed on his lower back and jabbed his buttocks again and again with their long, needle-like pincers. Since the parasites were non-material, he couldn't swat them away. His hands went through them, and thus he had to endure their jabs for twenty minutes every night. After they finished sucking out his vital energies, the creatures variously flew off through the wall, back to the insane dimensions whence they came, and he fell asleep.

Gradually he could see other species of invisible glowing creatures. It was as if watching the mosquitoes had sharpened his astral senses, peeling a filter from his perceptions, allowing him access to a previously invisible density of existence inhabited by myriad ephemeral monsters.

This state of secret madness peaked, then stabilized in Gurning's mind, allowing him to perform his job while ignoring the weird things

flying around him during the day, entities which no one else could see because others were not attuned, like himself, to the vibration of other dimensions. Ironically, it was this "ability" to see invisible creatures that would later allow Gurning to save the President's life. It also would cause him to be killed himself on the morning of April 2nd of the coming year, bloodily and horribly crushed to death by the White House bowling alley pin setter.

After Gurning was promoted, Project Almond soon fell prey to the oldest edict of government: *Chaos rules*. Especially when a significant strata of employees was constantly fired and replaced in a recurring four-year cycle. And especially when the coordinator of Project Almond was a Grade A paranoid schizophrenic.

Eventually, the Law of Chaos caught up with this remote subsection of the Pentagon's vast disinformation department; this is why, by the time Carson came to the White House, no one was exactly sure which blueprints were real and which blueprints were false. Although the Pentagon would never admit it, the fake prints were so cleverly designed by Gurning, so subtle in their layers of falsity, that soon the exact inner architecture of the older levels and rooms in the White House was unknown to anyone.

INSERT OLIVIA SCENE AS THEY ENTER THE WHITE HOUSE AND MEET THE STAFF

3. *The Televised War: A Digression*

Before President-elect William Carson won his landslide victory, three previous presidents fought a series of long and unsatisfying wars against middle east terrorism.

Wars, as everyone knows, had become reality television shows. At first the mideast war garnered formidable ratings and sponsors. Americans felt good about it, and the truth was, Americans deserved to feel good. They knew that America the Democracy at its core was a good idea, that its precepts worked a good deal better than many other countries, and that all of this was worth protecting. Despite its great intrinsic evil, the wars made Americans feel strong again, and television, their secular god, shone its light upon their side of the war.

The televised war, lasting three Presidential administrations and a spate of ingenious ad campaigns, starred a smorgasbord of Muslim and American corpses, and was followed by a dessert tray of Oil Chocolate Mousse. The world's sweet tooth made this dish worth trillions on the international dessert menu. By the end of their bedraggled terms, the string of wartime presidents were exhausted from their ceaseless expressions of patriotism, as was the well-meaning American public who had initially attached flags to their gas-guzzling SUV's, before they began to suspect the obvious, that the wars were a simple fluid transfer, a sort of international fucking, trading American blood for foreign oil. All three war-time Presidents ended their terms as jittery wrecks, all that warring having worn them down to the bone. Literally. Alone at night in the Oval Office, to relieve the immense tension of each day, all three jacked off to fantasies of mideast whores fellating them under the oval office desk.

And when a series of natural disasters bankrupted the country and killed its citizens, decades of brainwashing by TV praising politicians as our saviors came to an end. It was obvious even to the most recalcitrant idiot that politics was not the solution to anything, but rather a labyrinth occupied by alcoholic oafs, sexual perverts and bureaucratic boobs who had to be avoided, humored and otherwise circumvented at all costs, not depended upon as everyone had mistakenly believed.

Snapping out of their delusion, the American public began to actually remember that the Bad Guys responsible for the whole bloody mess got away. As the wars orgasmed and the military industrial complex and their political whores smoked their post-coital cigarettes and divvied

up the Lubricants of War, the public felt suckered and soiled, their dead children's bodies basted and broiled on the Haliburton Hibache.

The public blamed their presidents for allowing the original terrorists to go free. What had happened to the presidents of the Good Old Days, the ones who used to hunt down and arrest the Bad Guys? Senior citizens, senile enough to remember an early twentieth century full of bold leadership, yammered in disgust and despair. This despair puzzled the young, since the string of presidents their parents adored were obviously loser dudes, jock assholes and slick cunt-heads.

For indeed, the qualifications for becoming President of the United States had changed since Lincoln's time. Before Carson, the chief qualification was to be a wealthy, photogenic piece of shit. No one was to blame for this, of course. It was historical entropy at work, buffeted by the complacency of an increasingly television-soused citizenry.

Thus, after the wars and natural disasters, the nation was ready for something new. What they really wanted was something untainted. Something fresh. Something human. Some honest-to-god humanity to make them forget the inhuman first half of the new century.

4. *The New President*

There was a consensus of rapt astonishment when William Carson, seemingly an untainted, fresh, honest to god human, was elected President. His Roman Catholicism surprisingly worked in his favor, giving him an aura of novelty and a built-in comparison to JFK, Camelot, and all that sappy happy horseshit. Young, charismatic and optimistic, Carson not only read books, but had actually written three. Two were patently mediocre. But one, a witty analysis of the symbiosis between politics and advertising, was not only honest and hopeful, but vaguely inspiring. In truth, Carson was the type of President people thought could never again be elected: someone of above-average intelligence who was accessible, direct and accountable. A President who actually wrote his own speeches. Sometimes. And he had spirit and ran the show and wanted things done his way.

Carson's rise to power however hadn't exactly been smooth sailing. During his second term as senator, his wife Peggy was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer. Her decline was sudden and tragic. Carson was overcome with grief and dropped out of the campaign for a month at its peak. So, in retrospect, you couldn't blame him for losing track of what his campaign manager Bob Yung was doing.

Bob Yung was a bone-thin, eccentric, brilliant, Asian-American, Stanford University graduate with a Ph.D in Political Science. He was also addicted to pot. And was the most ambitious person to ever drive a Lexis. He was serious, quiet, but witty, his mind always working overtime on ten problems simultaneously, all of which he would solve.

Although on the surface a white-shirted materialist, Yung was secretly fascinated with the mystical side of politics, with what he considered the magical and paradoxical personalities of great politicians. He knew that the most powerful politicians were expert actors, magicians who specialized in conjuring sincerity. They knew how to project an Aura of Caring down to the tiniest nuance of an eyelash. Once on an acid trip, Yung spoke to the Muse of Politics whose eyelashes spoke volumes, and who was dedicated to developing and practicing the zenlike Art of Pretending to Care. Which turned into a Bad Trip when Yung realized that his Muse was even faking that.

Yung considered master politicians to be Gray Magicians, those who used White and Black Magic indiscriminately, and whose greatest weapon was projecting a powerful, creepy aura of optimism, even while children were being machine-gunned all around them.

After Peggy passed away and their campaign headquarters were swamped with sympathy cards, emails and telegrams, Bob Yung was alone in his office smoking pot when he had The Cancer Epiphany. Peggy's terminal illness, if handled the right way, could be the best thing that had ever happened to them.

A staunch believer in the power of spiritual affirmations, Bob locked himself in his office and stayed up all night, smoking joints and typing over and over, *Bob Yung will be the next White House Chief of Staff*. The sentence fit thirty-four times on a page. By 6 a.m. he had filled five hundred pages, which meant he'd typed *Bob Yung will be the next White House Chief of Staff* seventeen thousand times.

When he came out of the office, he had booked Carson as the keynote speaker at the World Breast Cancer Survivors Summit.

When Carson found out, he was furious. "Jesus Christ, Bob. It'll look like I'm trying to use Peggy's cancer to get votes."

But Bob knew something that Carson didn't -- that as a result of Bob's 17,000 affirmations, the name *Bob Yung* was paranormally etched into the Skein of Reality as the next Chief of Staff. Therefore Reality Itself was now biased towards making Carson the next President.

Bob also had the advantage of knowing that Carson was a decent guy who had loved his wife.

So Bob poured Carson a glass of fine scotch, put his arm around him and in low tones explained that if someone as admired as Carson spoke from his heart and shared his story of loss, pain and grief, it would obviously help survivors and their families around the world.

Carson bought it.

Bob was good.

At the Survivors Summit, Carson gave the speech of his life to the mastectomic crowd. Television, newspapers, magazines, they couldn't get enough of this handsome guy's cancer grief. Ecstatic, Bob locked himself in his office, smoked more joints and typed *Carson will be elected President* one hundred thousand times.

One year and seven months later, William Xavier Carson won the Presidency by the biggest landslide in history. And Bob Yung became the first Asian-American White House Chief of Staff.

The day after Carson's landslide victory, the stock market boomed. That said it all. After the Dark Age of fake wars, natural disasters and economic slavery, a New Age of strength, optimism and prosperity had dawned.

5. *The First Chick*

Althea would have called her *The First Vagina*, *The First Gash*, or even *The First Cunt*, but she held back because she knew that the words would have the feel of describing an older woman, that Liv might see her Mother's face when Althea made her sick jokes. Althea was a good friend, careful with her words when it came to Mrs. Carson, whose tragic death had robbed her of being *First Lady*. Mrs. Carson had been a beautiful, soulful woman. And Althea had loved her almost as much as Liv had.

Instead, Althea called Liv "*The First Chick*."

The *First Girl* was thirteen and striking looking. Long, straight black hair, delicate deep-set eyes that often had that moist, glistening sheen seen in people a little too in touch with their emotions. And, like Althea, The *First Girl* had a wicked, perverse sense of humor.

Olivia was an only child. From the beginning, her father had always been obsessed with his career, and couldn't seem to set aside much quality time for his girl, no matter how much he loved her and wanted her to be happy. Carson was a good man, but like most workaholics, he was an incompetent father and passed on the primary responsibility of parenting to his wife.

Right or wrong, Peggy happily raised Olivia herself because she wanted Carson to be able to dedicate himself to his career.

When Peggy passed away, it was natural for Olivia to cling to her father for love and attention. But the more needy she became, the more awkward he felt. Unlike normal fathers, he didn't have any intimate extended experience with his daughter. And now they were moving into the White House together, which meant two opposite things: he'd be alone with her more than ever, and yet have even less time to give her. Like most Catholics, he dealt with the problem by ignoring it and constantly feeling guilty.

Growing up, Olivia had been a good-natured, highly-intelligent child. She was proud of her Dad, but resented the fact that he spent hardly any time with her. She was certain he would draw closer to her after her mother died. At the funeral, he held her constantly, not saying much, but staying warm and close. It felt good to Olivia and she thought things would be different from now on. So it was hard for her to forgive him later when he was sometimes only reachable through his army of assistants or, worst of all, through that gangly jerk Bob Yung.

Despite all of this, she was able to forget her resentment and be excited about becoming The First Girl

It was nine at night. She was watching the news while packing her bags for the big move when some cynic on CNN came on talking about all the publicity her father was getting from his grief. She knew the reporter might say something that would twist a knife in her heart so she dove at the remote and changed the channel. Only to hear an even nastier Fox News journalist accuse her father of riding her mother's corpse to the Presidency.

She clicked it off. Stared at the empty screen.

And burst into tears. She ripped the blouse in her hands. Kicked her desk over. Threw a lamp into a corner. It twitched on its cord still plugged into the wall and smashed with a movement of spastic ugliness as the room plunged into blackness.

She sat on the bed sobbing and wishing more than anything in the world that her mother was still alive. But no, more than that, she wished that the TV was wrong about her father.

When the President and his daughter moved into their new home at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, they both put on a good face for the press. News stories profiled Olivia Carson as exceptionally intelligent for her age, but shy, bookish, hinting at, well, boring.

But Liv didn't care what people thought. She was The First Girl and she was moving into the actual *White House* and everybody else could kiss her ass. The first time she set eyes on her new bedroom, holding her cat's traveling case, she smiled and thought, *First Girl, you freakin rule.*

Agent Frank Levinson, the quiet young Secret Service agent assigned to protect Olivia, led her and Carson to see her room. It was at the end of a long hallway lined with original Audubon paintings that she thought were cool in a corny way. But she felt something strange in the long hallway. An odd vibe, a slight draft perhaps, something indefinable. Frank explained that this was the oldest part of the White House that was still standing. Her bedroom was set apart from the rest of the Residency and she liked it that way.

Alone in her room, Liv opened the case and let out Larry, her sleek black Burmese kitty, who sidled up hard against her legs and purred. She picked him up and whirled around. She collapsed on the bed with Larry in her arms and stared at the hand-painted gold leaf cherubs on the ceiling. *How cool and how weird to be the daughter of the President of the United States of America.*

Bob Yung had asked Liv not to use her cell phone until the numbers on her call list were approved. But she had to call Althea right now or her head would explode.

Last year she and Althea, her nihilistic, goth-type best friend, got in trouble for making prank phone calls to a screw factory, a fork factory and a pea soup factory. Where Liv's twisted sensibilities came from nobody knew for sure. As Althea said, could it be because she was an only child, alone most of the time, and her mom was dead? Olivia knew she was secretly weird, but couldn't see the best thing about herself, that compared to most children, she was a well-meaning, honest person, especially when you saw her against the backdrop of politics, the coldest and most profane profession on the planet.

She put on a CD and looked out the window. Her room overlooked the south lawn, with a clear view of the patio. She remembered how Althea had described the perfect window for a sniper. One you could shoot from and waste at least forty people before they took you out. Her bedroom window matched Althea's description to a T. She looked out at the lawn's long green expanse, and pictured it littered with bloody tourists and secret service agents. She sat on the bed with her cell phone and speed-dialed Althea as Larry jumped in her lap.

"Hello?"

She turned down the music, forced her voice to sound calm. "Guess where I am."

There was a pause. "In your room in the *White House*?"

They both screamed hysterically. Olivia started jumping up and down on the bed, jostling Larry who hissed and jumped off. Liv squealed like a maniac. "I live in the White House! I live in the White House!" She screamed like a banshee.

Suddenly her door burst open. Agent Frank Levinson rushed in with cool precision flashing his automatic weapon. Liv stopped jumping and froze as the agent scanned the room.

"You all right?" he barked at her.

She nodded, indicated the phone. "Just kidding around."

There was a noise in the closet. Levinson whipped open the closet door and instinctively shoved his gun at whatever moved, which turned out to be Larry. Liv reached behind her and pinched her ass so she wouldn't laugh.

The agent saved face by winking at Liv without smiling and echoing, "Just kidding around." He put away his gun, grinned and left the room. He was gone so quickly it was surreal; it was hard to believe a man

with a gun had just been in her room. She lay back on the bed with her phone as Larry jumped onto her chest.

"Who the hell was that?"

Liv whispered to Althea, "A secret service agent! He heard me screaming! You won't believe this! He had a gun!" She fell back on the bed and whispered what happened.

"What's he look like?"

"Like a god."

"When are you going to do him?"

"Shut up."

"You can order him to give you a lap dance."

"Shut up!"

They laughed and held back screams till they choked.

The next day was the big briefing between the First Family and the White House Staff. Basically it was a meet and greet, but Olivia already knew a lot of the faces from the election campaigns.

She especially remembered burly Jack Preston, the new Attorney General, as the guy she saw crying alone in the hallway when her dad lost his first bid for the senate. She'd never seen an adult cry before, except in the movies. It was especially weird because he was such a tough guy. Now she could never look at him without picturing him at the end of the hall, his face red and distorted, sobbing, his forehead pressed against a fire extinguisher.

Olivia was a tad nosy when it came to secrets and always peeked into her father's folders and files when he wasn't looking. One thing she'd learned from one of these files was all about Jack Preston. Aside from politics, Preston's three passions in life were corporate law, Egyptian art and skepticism. When he was an attorney in San Francisco, he had been elected president of the local chapter of the Skeptics Society. He wanted his chapter to get down to the real business of being a Skeptic---busting religious and medical frauds who robbed the poor, the elderly and the stupid. But his ideals were co-opted by a flange of new members, egoists who were only interested in humiliating people who had idiotic beliefs. Hating crooks much more than he disliked idiots, he quit in disgust.

The report read that Preston was married to the daughter of an Irish slaughterhouse magnate, had two six year old twins, Beth and Dave, but was such a die-hard atheist, he couldn't even pretend with his kids that Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny were real. Liv thought he was really a jerk to do that. But his atheism, the report summarized, had to remain a

secret. If it got out that the Attorney General was a godless heathen, it would be bad for business. After she read this report, Olivia watched Preston during one of her father's "group prayers" during a crisis. She saw how Preston looked uncomfortable, having to close his eyes and bow his head and clasp his hands together and fake it. She knew that Preston thought prayer was for fools. That he knew in his heart that nobody would come to his aid unless it was himself.

Then there was Bob Yung, the new Chief of Staff, the smiley Asian guy who ran all of her dad's campaigns. He loved group prayer and always made a show of bowing his head deeper than everyone else. She could never understand why her dad liked Bob, except maybe because he was smart, rich and kind of witty in an annoying way. She heard her mom call Bob "The Trust Fund Kid" once. He reminded Liv of a smiling kimono dragon. Although he was probably a genius of sorts, she thought of him as a big grinning pinhead. When she talked or chatted on the web with Althea, their code-name for Bob Yung was "Dog Dung."

To Liv, the most impressive of the new employees was Karen Hitchcock, one of her father's six in-house bodyguards. Karen was pretty; she reminded Liv of a native American because of her straight black hair, sunken cheeks and long straight nose. She usually wore all black, which was cool, and looked like she could beat the shit out of anybody in the room, or at least would go down doing major damage. Once when everyone was acting serious around her father, and Dog Dung piped up with a semi-lame joke that they all laughed at, Karen sneaked a sarcastic eye-roll at Olivia that said, "What a jerk." But they had never spoken one word to each other. It was a secret friendship, based on one secret eye-roll.

Olivia spent the whole morning being shuffled to each department in the White House with her dad, shaking hands, meeting lines of smiling people and being told every two minutes how cute she was. She knew they meant well, but every time they called her cute, she instantly imagined swinging a samurai gitama and slicing their ears off. Then catching the blood spurting from the ear holes in a glass, guzzling it down and licking her lips for White House photographers like a nympho vampire. Just to show them how cute she was.

The Security Room was interesting, at least. Over a hundred monitors lined the walls showing security cam views of the public areas of the White House and surrounding areas. The tall, quiet security chief named Harry Furlong made it clear there were no cameras in their living

quarters, nor in the Oval Office, the Executive Conference Rooms or the NSA control rooms. Furlong, who had a lazy left eye that drifted slightly to one side, let Liv work the computer and got a closeup-of Larry her cat asleep on a hallway chair. That was pretty cool.

But the highlight of the morning, however, was meeting Nuang Muonga, a character who worked in the kitchen. Muonga, one of three White House chefs, was half black, half Asian, and had the most peculiar accent Olivia had ever heard. Sort of half cockney, half-Jamaican. While her dad greeted the head chef Argus and the butlers and maids, Muonga took Liv into the dining room and showed her an amazing trick. Holding a knife in each hand, he tossed two tomatoes over his head, sliced them in mid air and caught them on two plates.

Then Muonga said something that Olivia would never forget. He narrowed his eyes as if seeing something on the side of her face; then he put his finger under her chin, turned her face and examined her temple, where she had three small moles forming an equilateral triangle. Muonga moved closer and said in a low voice, "You got de sign on your head, girl. You gotta stay low and you gotta watch for tings."

"What are you talking about?"

Muonga just shrugged, pointed to her temple and said mysteriously, "Muonga calls zum how he sees zum. And you hafda mark, girl. Big tings in store for you. Dat makes you very special."

"Thanks, Muonga." Then she added: "You're special too." At that moment, she wished a clam knife had gutted out her vocal chords. Muonga thought her comeback was a bit lame as well, but to his credit just smiled and nodded as he polished the oven, the same oven his corpse would later be stuffed into and broiled at 325 degrees until his fat ignited all at once like a pile of gasoline-soaked rags.

In the afternoon, Olivia was given a private tour of the White House. Her guides were Agent Frank Levinson and his boss, Agent Leo Roth, a huge uniformed monolith of a man and the head of Residence Security. Roth was in charge of security in the First Family's living quarters and the public sectors. He'd memorized every factoid about the White House and loved to show off. "On the six main floors," he told Liv, "we've got one hundred thirty-two rooms, thirty-two bathrooms, one hundred forty-seven windows, four hundred and twelve doors, twelve chimneys, three elevators, and seven staircases."

As a treat, they took her "below." Olivia was amazed at the first three levels under the White House, which housed a gym, an indoor pool,

a movie theater and a bowling alley. Roth left Frank and Liv alone to bowl a few boxes and he kicked her ass. As a prize for second place, he showed her the locked entrance to a network of secret tunnels connecting the White House, the Capitol and the Pentagon in the event of war. Frank emphasized that for security reasons, Olivia was forbidden to explore the White House on her own without permission from him. He made her repeat this after him, which made her pissed off. He sensed this and kidded her about having a two-fifty, six-two baby-sitter. After that she liked Agent Frank Levinson. She remembered Althea's sick joke and as he escorted her back to her room, she had to force herself not to imagine him on his knees like a dog licking her down there.

Frank's last warning piqued Olivia's curiosity. Like one of those cartoon houses, the White House looked small and quaint outside and ridiculously huge inside. She fantasized dressing like a cat burglar and sneaking around at night, discovering secret subterranean tunnels miles under the White House, cobwebbed and haunted by the ghosts of murdered CIA agents and assassinated politicians, and leading to giant aquariums holding space aliens.

As it turned out, her fantasy would partially come true.

6. Watched

It was their first dinner alone in the White House. Chef Argus, whom Liv thought was boring compared to exotic, wild-eyed Muonga, had prepared an elegant spread. Francis the butler, whom Liv thought looked and acted like a robot, seated President and Olivia formally at each end of the table. When the robot left, and they were alone for the first time that day, they looked at each other uncomfortably. After a pause, he smiled.

"Grab your plate, Liv, and sit next to me."

It was a decent attempt to act like a Dad. But by then Olivia's resentment was so ingrained in her that she couldn't, as he had hoped, meet him halfway by smiling back. She gave him minimum eye contact as she moved her setting kitty-corner to his. The truth was, she was in a bad mood from stupidly stuffing herself with Skittles earlier while watching TV in her room. She wasn't exactly being insolent, but it was close. As they ate, he tried to make small talk. Even though she knew he didn't like Althea, he asked about her, an obvious attempt to get on Liv's good side. And told her how much the new staff liked her. She knew that was a lie, because she didn't say two words to anybody, except Muonga. Her father was doing exactly the wrong thing, using transparent lies to try to butter her up and become her confidante.

Nice try.

But why was she acting like such a bitch? She realized she was staring down at her plate and eating as he talked, saying as little as possible. She hated the fact that she was a bitch and that she hated her own father. He was a nice man. And, like, he was the freakin' President. At least the guy was trying. "The guy?" It was weird that she could think of him as some *guy*. But she knew the reason. He'd never been her father. Not when it counted. Never.

A hell of a lot would have to go down before she felt even one iota closer to him.

She thought these thoughts as he talked about school starting up next Monday, joked about the body guards following him into the bathroom. But she was an implacable stone wall. An iceberg. She looked up only when she had to. A part of her felt terrible about making him uncomfortable. But another part of her felt good about it. This was her way of punishing him for being such a bad dad.

But she did hate being a bitch. So she decided to make minimal small talk to make things tolerable for them both. She was about to tell him about the agent bursting into her room with gun, but suddenly stopped herself.

Something strange entered the room. A cold heaviness in the air. No, not in the air. She realized it had entered not the room, but her mind,

She looked up at the chandelier, the furniture, the paintings on the wall. She felt something indefinable permeate the room. As if the dining room, while looking exactly the same, was now utterly different than it was a moment ago.

As if there was something else there in the room with them.

As if they was being watched.

The breeze went away. She shook it off.

Of course we're being watched, she thought as she nibbled on her prime beef, every second we're under freaking surveillance.

This was true, except for their bedrooms and bathrooms. It sucked, but they were the First Family and it was a national security issue.

After dinner things took a turn for the worse. Her Dad asked if she wanted to watch some TV with him. She sighed and murmured OK and followed him into the study. As any parent knows, when you're fourteen you know everything, and adults, especially your parents, are, if they're lucky, one notch above clueless morons. Olivia listened to counter-culture music and watched a lot of MTV shows, and knew that her father knew practically nothing about what was happening with kids her age. So when her father wanted to watch Fox News, featuring the same jerk who'd made the crack about her mother, she became insolent. He tried to be nice and defer to whatever she wanted to watch. But the nicer he was, the more arrogant and rude she became. She couldn't help it.

It was one of those things you couldn't stop. She knew how it was going to end, but she couldn't do anything about it. Like watching a train wreck in slow motion. She started ignoring him completely until he couldn't take it anymore. He clicked off the TV.

"Look, Liv, I know it's been hard on you since Mom died. But it's been hard on me, too. So I need you to start acting like a big girl and help me out here."

"Since when do you need my help?"

"Liv, listen to me. Now that we're here, people are going to be looking at us under a microscope every place we go and listening to everything we say."

"I don't care."

"Well, you'd better start caring, young lady. If your Mom saw the way you've been acting, you'd get a spanking like when you were five."

"Don't talk about Mom."

"I loved your Mom. You know that."

"Then why did you use her death to get elected."

She had pressed the B.F.F.H.

The Button From Fucking Hell.

He grabbed her by the arm. "That's it, young lady."

He struggled with her and pulled her over his knee. It was the first time that a young lady had been spanked in the White House. Except during the Clinton Administration. But while he was spanking her, she reverted to the child she was and screamed hysterically, her face red, "Keep hitting me! You think I care? Hit me all you want! I fucking hate you!"

She tried to punch him in the face but he grabbed her arm. She wrenched free and ran out of the room sobbing.

Carson was trembling.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit.

He sighed, got up, poured himself a well-deserved whiskey as he heard her door slam in the distance. Hard. A pivotal moment. With the slamming of the door, things changed between father and daughter forever.

He was alone and he put down his glass.

His eyes flooded with tears, and for the first time since the funeral, he cried as if his heart would break.

7. *It Begins*

Her dream that night was claustrophobic, insane and vivid. She was inside a black house. Everything was painted black, ceilings, doorknobs, windows. It was dark and she had to feel her way through the narrow black hallways. She was relieved when she found a doorway and entered a small dark room. There was a lit candle in the room, which she recognized as a church with dust over everything. She heard wind pounding the walls and roof. A violent storm was growing louder. All at once the room shook and the entire ceiling was suddenly ripped off by a monstrous tornado. The cyclone blew up the dust, blinding and choking her.

When she opened her eyes, the church had disappeared and she was high in the air clutching a flagpole. Her mom was next to her and they were clutching each other as the pole swayed back and forth, bending in the powerful wind. She yelled for her mom to hold on, when a bolt of lightning bolt cracked the pole in two and she and her mom fell.

She screamed, woke up, opened her eyes. Saw the gold cherubs on the ceiling. Remembered who she was. Didn't move. Wanted to remember the dream while it was still fresh. She was pretty good at symbols, and it didn't take a genius to interpret it. The storm made sense. The screamfest with her Dad. So the flag pole was probably a Freudian Dad symbol. But lightning blasting the pole, what was that?

She tried to remember more details, but it was starting to slip away.

Gone. "Fuck." She liked being the First Girl and saying the word *fuck* in the White House. She sat up and yawned. Larry was asleep next to her on the pillow, moving his paws in a cat-dream. She petted him and he started purring in his sleep. Then she saw the envelope addressed to her on the night table. Her father's handwriting. "To Liv."

Before she opened it, she put the envelope to her forehead like a magician and tried to guess what it would say. Something like, *I'm sorry about what happened. You shouldn't have said mean things about me and your mom. Let's try to get along. I love you.*

She opened the envelope and was amazed to read, *"Dear Liv, I'm very sorry about what happened. I promise I'll never do that again, but you have to promise you won't say mean things about me and your mom ever again. Let's try to get along. I love you, sweetie."*

She chuckled, impressed herself. Maybe she was psychic.

She thought the letter was OK, except for the "sweetie." She picked up the sleeping cat and snuggled with him. He stayed asleep, purring, a sound that helped her forget about her father spanking her. She remembered Althea's story about an old lady who lived alone with twenty cats that all slept with her. But a month after she dropped dead on the kitchen floor, the cops found that the cats had eaten half of her corpse when they ran out of food. There was a knock at the door.

"Come in."

Mrs. Bannon, the busty, middle-aged maid with thin lips and big breasts, stuck her head into the room.

"Are you awake, dear?"

"Yep."

"Your father the President asked me to look in on you this morning."

Olivia thought it was weird the way she said *Your father the President*.

"He told me you two had a rough night last night. So instead of all the things we had scheduled for you today, he said you could just take it easy. We can catch up on everything tomorrow." Her giant tits sidled into view. The giant bra under her maid uniform made a metallic scraping against the edge of the door. Olivia pictured the huge bra reinforced with titanium struts, assembled by guys in lab coats using mechanical arms.

"Sound good?"

"Yeah. Great."

"Why don't you meet me in the kitchen and we'll fix you up some breakfast. Your father the President had breakfast early and was whisked off to the Pentagon. He'll be back for supper tonight at eight o'clock.

Sound good?"

"Yeah. Great."

Later Olivia learned that this was to be template of all future conversations with Mrs. Bannon. She would enter every morning in her prim white maid's uniform and tell Liv where she was expected to be at what time, and always ended with her mega-tits scraping the door and pursed lips chirping, "Sound good?"

"Yeah. Great."

Muonga invited Liv to have breakfast in the kitchen with him instead of eating alone in the dining room. She accepted gladly, and almost spit up her milk when Muonga, kidding around, slapped two fried eggs on his chest and danced around her like a spastic ballerina. She

wondered if he was gay. If he wasn't, she thought he'd be great at it anyway.

The food made her feel better. But every two minutes somebody walked in and out saying hello to her, people whose names she couldn't remember and the entire afternoon became far too hectic and made her jittery and tense.

She thought about how different it would be if her Mom were here. She wished she could go back to her room and tell everybody to go to hell. But Mrs. Bannon had given her a *Things To Do* list. Everyone had a *Things To Do List*. There was an unspoken agreement that everyone kept busy as bees in the White House.

Then she remembered the Good Thing.

She was the President's daughter.

So while all those hordes of anonymous White House weirdoes hustled around like an army of insects doing who the hell knows what twenty-four hours a day, she sneaked out the room duringn one of the hand-shake sessions and went back to her room.

She crumpled the *Things To Do* list, threw it in the trash, opened another bag of Skittles, lay down on her bed and thought, *Everybody can go to hell.*

8. Trance

Something new began that night. Olivia had had her share of nightmares, the one with her mother and the flagpole being a recent bad one. But she'd never had a recurring dream, never mind a recurring nightmare. It was extreme and terrifying and, she would discover, relentless. It began differently each time, but always ended the same. The dream might start in a school hallway when an uncomfortable feeling came over her, one she remembered feeling before, somewhere. And then she would feel that she was being followed. If it was in the school hallway, she'd start running and looking for someone to help her, but the halls were deserted. She heard classes going on and pounded on the doors and screamed for help but no one heard her and the Thing was coming closer and she ran and ran and ran to escape it. When she turned a corner she was trapped, but there was one door, a huge door, and it was too heavy to open.

The Thing had turned the corner and was almost upon her. Sweating and hysterical, she used every ounce of her strength to force the door open. It suddenly gave way and swung open in a wide arc and she stumbled into the middle of a strange room.

And this was the part of the dream that was always the same:

She looked around and found herself in the middle of a misty cathedral, the wall covered with awesome religious tapestries, every nook filled with magnificent sculptures of Mary and Jesus and every shelf filled with exquisite gold leafed scriptures. She felt at peace and safe.

For a beat.

When she felt a cold wave of fear and froze in a panic as the Thing entered the room, slamming the door shut and she was too terrified to spin around and face the Terrible Thing as it engulfed her and she screamed and screamed and screamed--

She would wake up in a sweat, shaking.

Larry was always asleep next to her purring. And she always thought the same thing. *That dream sucked so bad.*

The problem was, when she went back to sleep, the dream would repeat, starting with a completely different scene, but ending in the same cathedral from hell. After the second time it repeated in one night, she was too afraid to go under fully and slept fitfully, waking herself up every time she felt herself on the verge of Dreamland.

And it wasn't just at night that she was haunted by the dream. The next day, because of her sleepless night, she nodded off during class and the dream returned. Luckily she woke herself before she started screaming in class and looked like an idiot. But the upshot was that she couldn't sleep. Or rather was too paranoid to sleep.

After three nights of waking up every twenty minutes, she was a wreck. Althea told her she was walking around like a strung out crack whore. She laughed. But the next morning she asked Muonga to sneak her a cup of coffee.

"Why you want dat, girl?" he whispered, "Dat stuff make you one of zem." He pointed to the suited drones buzzing past the kitchen door. Then he mimed drinking a cup of coffee and transformed into a jittery strung-out White House asshole. She howled laughing, but told him she wouldn't make a habit out of it. She just needed to stay awake for her tests. He shook his head, but figured it wouldn't kill her and gave her a cup. After school she'd go to the lobby and sneak another cup from the visitor's coffee station.

Agent Frank Levinson noticed she was jittery and tactfully asked if she was sleeping OK. He was so nice about it, she decided to unload and told him about the nightmares.

Frank listened, formed an opinion, kept it to himself. He'd seen the emotional distance between Olivia and her father. He knew his nightmares were emotional residue from the river of stress he ferried across every day. A parent's death was a tough break for a kid and he figured it must have stirred up all kinds of psychic shit in Liv's mind now that she was in the White House.

Frank was a gem. He ultimately followed the rules to the letter, but in doing so followed his instinct and heart. Therefore most of his reactions to things were perfect. In this instance, he had the strange urge to take her out to the East Lawn and show her some karate moves, which is exactly what he did. He used the excuse of getting some fresh air and that he was supposed to give The First Girl some self-defense training, and now seemed like as good a time as any.

The last thing she felt like doing was any form of exercise. She was exhausted. But Frank's charm and sincerity won her over. She met him on the bright lawn (after she sneaked another cup of coffee in the lobby), and he began to teach her the basics of akido. As it turned out, the focused exercise on the grass in the sunshine was the perfect thing to exorcise the demons haunting the nooks and crannies of her mind. The demons hidden during the day and trying to take over her mind at night. And

surprisingly, Olivia was an excellent student. Liv had always been athletic. But maybe the coffee helped, because she was a natural at akido. Her moves were fluid and strong, and she had a style and strength that surprised Frank. He let her throw him once. But the rhythm and force of her throw was more powerful and graceful than he had expected. Frank got up, impressed.

"You're powerful, kid. Get that from your Dad?"

"No. From coffee. I'm an addict." She asked him not to tell her Dad. Because the coffee was connected to the nightmares, and if he heard about her untidy subconscious he'd bring in an army of shrinks. Frank agreed to keep his mouth shut about the coffee. She liked sharing a secret with Frank, and secretly, it felt good to him too.

9. *The Secret Room*

She lay on her bed petting Larry when he started squirming. She knew that look on his face. It meant he either smelled food or needed the litter box. When he needed the box he sometimes made it obvious by emitting a ghastly blast of odor, which Althea called invisible cat emission, or I.C.E. One time Larry "iced" Althea right between the eyes. Liv howled as Althea screamed in the bathroom scrubbing off the invisible film of molecular cat shit clinging to her face.

If this squirm wasn't a catbox squirm, Larry would head for his food bowl or, having picked up a scent, dive onto the window sill and growl at a bird on a tree branch. But this time he leapt to the floor, ears on full alert, and froze, staring at the half-opened closet, sniffing.

All these portents regarding odor reminded her of the unexpected odor she experienced when she first set foot in the White House. She called it *The Smell*. It was a strangely sour fragrance wafting from areas in certain rooms and hallways at certain times. Behind the classy veneer and fresh paint job on everything, the place was *musty*. Once you got to know them, the old rooms and hallways greeted you with the faint aura of an alcoholic civil war corpse. Late at night, the entire house gave off the weird *Smell* as it seemed to sigh and readjust itself, like a cranky senior turning with bed sores, the blankets flapping briefly and releasing brief fingers of aroma from hidden pustules.

Suddenly Larry bolted into the closet and started violently rustling around inside. She remembered when, as a kitten, he used to make her laugh by wrestling a pair of her underwear. But this time she could tell Larry was after something real. His movements were intense. Not play.

Must be a mouse. Or a rat, she thought. A rat in the White House. Perfect.

Larry was in the closet yowling and scratching at something. Olivia finally heard wood cracking. She went to the closet and saw that the end of an old wooden baseboard had been broken off, revealing a big hole behind it. Larry was nowhere in sight. Must've clawed it off and squeezed through the hole after the rat.

She knelt down, called through the hole, put her ear to it. She heard him somewhere behind the wall. She grabbed a flashlight from her drawer and ran back to the closet. She didn't want Larry to get trapped in there. The last thing she wanted was a team of White House jocks in her room making a scene about her cat.

She knelt down and pulled the rest of the baseboard off, found that it was connected to a larger square of wood that she was able to yank free, creating an opening in the back of her closet the size of a small window. She stuck her head in, shining the flashlight.

The light revealed a long narrow space between the walls that seemed to go on for thirty feet. It was then that she felt her first twinge of fear. At what, she didn't know. But she trusted her feelings, especially when it felt so Bad. But she could hear Larry at the far end of the narrow passage scratching at something. She called him but he ignored her. So she shook off the fear, squeezed through the hole into the narrow space and stood up. The floor was covered with dust, dirt, old wires and nails, splinters of wood and scattered piles of black little nubs she recognized as rat droppings.

Something furry and unpleasant suddenly raced past her feet and down the hall. She screamed as she trained the light on the rat or mouse that disappeared deep into the darkness ahead. *Jesus, if the White House has rats, every building in the world must be infested.* Now that she was pretty deep in the recess herself, she didn't want anyone to hear her, so she whispered fiercely for Larry to get his ass back there. The feeling of Dread and Fear she sensed faintly when she stuck her head in the hole was stronger here, and was getting stronger the further she went down the dark passageway.

At the end, the wallspace turned to the right. Around the corner she found Larry clawing wildly at the bottom of an old brick wall, scratching out loose mortar, widening a crack between the crumbling bricks. He suddenly squeezed his scrawny body half-way through the bricks. She grabbed onto his tail to stop him, but he squirmed free and disappeared through the wall.

"Shit! Larry get back here!"

The old brickwork looked a century old, maybe two. She squatted down, shone the light through the crack. There was an open space behind it. Now the Fear was stronger. She had to get Larry out of there quickly before she lost her nerve completely.

A tool would help. She quickly retraced her steps, crawled back into the closet, grabbed a hammer and squeezed back through the narrow wallspace to the crumbling brick wall.

She pried out a brick with the hammer claw, trying to be as quiet as possible. It disintegrated into red dust as she pulled it out, finally making a hole as big as a CD. She shone the light through and saw an iron plate a foot behind it. Her curiosity helped her fight the Fear that seemed poised

behind the brickwork. She hammered out more and more bricks until the old wall crumbled, revealing the iron plate. It was six feet tall and four feet wide, rusty, extremely heavy. Water damage in the wooden floor had caused a corner of the plate to sink at an angle, revealing something strange behind it.

Behind the plate she saw a hint of an old door covered with crosses, dusty statuettes of Mary and Jesus and other occult symbols from other religions. The Fear returned like cold fist around her mind. But Larry was in there and she'd gone too far to turn back now. She pushed a corner of the big iron plate and was surprised when it gave way. The rotted floorboard beneath it cracked and the plate fell sideways with a loud thud.

She froze, listening for an alarm going off at the thud. But there was silence and she sighed in relief.

The bottom right corner of the door had rotted away leaving a hole big enough for Larry to get through. She tried the knob but the door wouldn't budge. Then she saw the strange thing, that it was nailed shut. This was definitely weird. As she pulled the nails out with the hammer, a sleazy Presidential scene played out in her mind. The most boring President she'd ever read about, President Calvin Coolidge, was slapping his mistress who is screaming that she'll tell his wife the Dirt. She grabs a letter opener from the desk and tries to stab him but he grabs it and they fall and the knife pierces her heart. Hysterical, Silent Cal drags her blood-soaked body into a closet, nails it shut and has carpenters remodeling the place and wall it in.

Olivia pulled out the last nail and smelled something wafting through the crack, a strange smell. The scent of fresh almonds.

She tried the doorknob again. Locked. Still fighting the fear, she stepped back, got her leverage and kicked the door open with all of her might.

The lock splintered and the door swung open to blackness.

Peering inside, feeling terror but not knowing why, she smelled the almonds more distinctly as a faint breath across her face. As if the blackness itself was a giant mouth chewing almonds, ready to chew her.

She turned on the flashlight and fired the beam inside, revealing a small room.

She was shocked as she recognized it. It was the cathedral she'd seen in her recurring nightmare. But the room was like a tiny caricature of dream cathedral, an ugly distortion. The floor was littered with a grotesque mess of smashed religious paintings, books, furniture and statues from another era.

There was no turning back. She shone the light and slowly entered. A tingling on her scalp and chin grew stronger as she stepped into the room and a wave of intense terror washed over her. She tensed, gritting her teeth and tried to turn to urn away. But something stopped her from turning. Something moved her legs into the middle of the room, a force of the energy wafting around her pushing her. She tried to fight it. But it was so natural that the Force felt like her own volition drawing her into the center of the room.

She stopped in the center as a roaring, tingling, sheet of energy grabbed her violently. The smell of almonds, burning hair and excrement was suddenly thick in her lungs. She screamed and the Force enveloped her like a cold, swirling mass of long invisible hair around her neck, creeping between her legs, pulling tightly around her.

She could sense an intelligence behind It. Something voracious, hateful and insane, a Force that wanted to hurt, kill her.

And kill her father.

Yes, kill her father.

Something changed in her as she realized she wanted It to kill him. Yes, he deserve to die. And so did she. She smiled. She knew she would submit to It. She would let it kill her. She was meaningless anyway, the worthless daughter of the President. He was all that mattered. But her death would cause him pain and she wanted that. She wanted to die and deserved to die. It could not be beaten, because she was worthless and powerless, so worthless that her mother had gladly died and left Olivia alone because her mother didn't care about such a worthless fucking daughter---

NO!

She suddenly realized that these were not her thoughts. These were the thoughts of the Entity as its filthy invisible hair tensed around her body.

But Olivia would never lie back and let anyone hurt her. Never. Not without a fight. Her adrenaline kicked in and she shrieked and whirled like an animal fighting for its life. She screamed and flailed wildly trying to untangle herself from the thick net of foul astral hair.

But the Entity had its tendrils wrapped tightly around her, writhing between her legs. Holding her tightly as it did The Horrible Thing.

It began raping her. Not by sexual intercourse, but by a million red hot astral needles slicing through every cell of her body. It ripped through her and raped every pore of her body. Swirling waves of searing pinpricks slashed invisibly through her like tiny razors hacking at her flesh. She

screamed at the excruciating pain that ravaged every cell in her body. It was the most intense pain she'd ever experienced. And terrifying in that she knew that she deserved it all. She was worthless and powerless and deserved to die and---

NO!

Olivia was psychically strong. Stronger than the false thoughts that tried to rape her mind. *Go to hell!* she shrieked silently as she whipped her arms around again spinning to free herself.

She sensed surprise from the Entity. It hesitated. The slicing waves of agony diminished for a moment. She boldly screamed aloud now.

"NO!"

She whirled again, flailing her arms with all of her might, willing herself to break the black astral cobwebs wrapped around her neck and face trying to choke and smother her.

She sensed chaotic bursts of rage, frustration and disgust from the Entity. Suddenly she was lifted from the floor and slammed against the wall. Her body slid down across the peeling yellowed wallpaper and collapsed on the floor as the Entity released her with an explosion of black light. It left her body and swirled away from her towards the open door, emitting a psychic burst of black exhilaration, of murderous power, of freedom, the freedom to Do What Thou Wilt. The mad whirlwind of glittering nothingness raked across her body and dissipated into the passageway.

It was gone.

Olivia felt an ugly emptiness in the room, the residue of evil one feels when a mass murder is dragged from a courtroom.

She struggled to her feet defiantly. But her body and mind had been lacerated so intensely that she fainted and fell hard on the filthy floor.

10. *The Embedding*

Olivia awoke, sprawled in the dust, the flashlight in her hand still faithfully cutting its beam through the dark. She sat up and remembered that something bad had happened. But her mind was a blur. She no longer sensed anything in the room. It felt empty, damp, barren. It was as if the room had been alive and was now dead. As if it was an empty bag of afterbirth, expelled after centuries of gestation. Puzzled and bruised, she staggered to her feet. Her knees and back hurt. She wobbled as she shone the light shakily through the darkness.

She was right about the room. It reminded her of a cathedral because it appeared to be an old chapel. But a chapel with everything in it broken, ruined, blasted by a hurricane. There were rows of dusty, insect-eaten pews overturned and on end, a small pulpit in front of religious scenes painted in gold leaf on the wall.

But what was this room doing in the middle of the White House? It was obvious that no one knew about it. But how was that possible? You'd think security would be aware of every micron of the building. Didn't those idiots ever scan the White House with all that cutting edge shit they were always bragging about? Obviously they hadn't. For this small room had lain untouched and unfathomed for at least a hundred years.

But what had happened?

Her mind was still a spinning blur. Something had attacked her, she knew that. But what? All she remembered was the Force. And the Pain.

The Force had been completely alien to her everyday experience, so alien that her mind could not process it. Rationalization was a key to human survival. Her intellect, a strong logical mind, began to rationalize, filter, reshape and reprogram the experience in her neural net, building a wall against the Fear that would protect her.

It was obvious to her what had happened and she sighed, relieved.

No sleep. And the dreams. And the bag of goddam Skittles.

And my dead Mother and brain-dead Dad.

And the existence of the room?

It was obviously an old storage room. Where they kept old historic religious junk. The last time they remodeled, maybe they were in a hurry and figured it was cheaper just to wall it in.

That, part of her brain pointed out, remembering the crosses and symbols plastered clumsily on the outside of the door with a sense of urgency, of desperation, doesn't exactly fit.

But it fit better in her mind than the idea that a secret room held a demon in the White House.

She laughed. The laughing made her back hurt. She must've fallen flat on her face like an idiot. But the laughter helped. Because a deep part of her mind was holding off the Terror at arm's length, the truth that she had been attacked by a Force that wanted to kill her and her father.

Then she remembered the Smell. She took a deep breath and came to her senses. The room must have been filled with stagnant, poisoned air. What she thought was almonds must have really been ozone or some other funky gas an old mansion might excrete. That was what knocked her out. And made her hallucinated the attack and the "ghost," residue from an old B-movie slasher flick she and Althea had watched recently.

Suddenly Larry was sidling up to her legs, purring. She picked him up and looked at her watch. Almost five o'clock. If somebody came into her room with a staff key, they might find the passageway and make a big deal about it.

Holding Larry, she hurried out of the room, over the steel plate, through the wall space, through the hole and into her closet. She covered up the hole with the piece of wood she'd removed, replaced the baseboard and everything looked semi-normal.

Larry scrambled out of her arms, jumped onto the bed and lay down, flipping his tail back and forth like a metronome. That's when she realized he had something in his mouth. She moved closer and saw that it was a rat's head.

"Shit!" She picked him up by the back of his neck and shook him to get him to drop it. swatted him off the bed. But Larry just hung limply, looked at her and growled. There was no way he was giving up that rat's head. He squirmed free with it clamped in his teeth and raced down the Audabon hallway.

She watched him disappeared at the end of the hall and willed him to drop the prize on Dog Dung's chair. She pictured Dog walking around without knowing that a rat's head was stuck between his skinny asscheeks.

Well, that was a good sign. At least she could think of something upbeat about a decapitated rat.

She looked in the mirror and saw that she was filthy, her face, arms and clothes caked with dust and dirt.

But there was something else. For an instant in the mirror, she saw a fog curling behind her -- a purple and black mold was growing insanely out of the opposite wall. She spun around, feeling the Terror again for an instant. The wall behind her was normal. In the mirror, the fog was gone. But something did seem different. For a moment her image in the mirror seemed out of perspective, and the room behind her seemed to be moving, shifting, a micron at a time.

But there was more. The room and its atmosphere seemed to be embedded with an impossible texture that made its geometry feel alien and wrong. An imperceptible film covered everything, embedded into every atom. She closed her eyes, feeling woozy, feeling the Fear begin again.

What's going on?

She opened her eyes and was relieved as everything snapped back to total normalcy. The Thing she had sensed a moment ago had vanished.

No sleep, the poison gas, the dream, the slasher film.

She got undressed, feeling relief as she peeled off the dirty clothes.

In the shower, she turned the water on very hot and worked up a lather and scrubbed the dirt and dust from her face and arms, washing it down her legs into a dirty crusty whirlpool at her feet.

11. *The Omniscient Ass*

The next morning was Saturday. No school. As soon as she woke up she saw the note by the clock. *Call Althea*. She told Althea about finding the room between the walls. Althea thought it was cool and weird but agreed that it was just a storage room they'd walled in to save money. Liv decided to leave out the part about the ghost raping her. The truth was, she only half remembered it, and it sounded like one of her sick jokes anyway. Althea was going away to visit boring relatives today and asked Liv to switch places with her when the door opened. It was Mrs. Bannon.

"Are you awake, dear?"

"Yep. On the phone"

"After breakfast, Mr. Yung asked if he could speak with you in his office." Tit thrust, scrape, scrape, pursed lips. "Sound good?"

"Yeah. Great."

Olivia was waiting in Dog Dung's office, spinning his huge antique globe. Once or twice she imagined Dog spinning it in private, spitting on it as it spun, his way of deciding which country to help or exploit next. But most of the time she pictured him alone late at night on his knees licking the globe, pausing to lick extra long and hard on Washington D.C. His favorite G-spot.

As she watched the globe spin, she thought about the tiny filthy room and the bad feeling she felt ever since she went in there. Last night, she kept waking up all night with disturbing nightmares that, upon waking, she couldn't remember. Her own memory must be protecting her, like one of those split-personality movies, when the patient blocks out all the bad stuff.

She fantasized telling Dog Dung about the secret room, how he would completely freak out and send his army of nazis stomping through her room, tearing down her closet walls until they found Anne Frank huddled inside and hauled her off to the camp, until they reached her dirty little secret room and blasted lasers at it to eradicate it like a cancer in the body of the pure lily white White House. And that's the way it felt, sort of. She went someplace dirty and felt unclean. Now she was trying to switch it in her mind from being creepy to being interesting. The only thing she knew for sure was that she wasn't going to tell a soul. Except Althea.

Bob came in, said a friendly hi, closed the door and sat down at his desk. After the same condescending small talk he always used on her, he got down to his usual business of being a complete asshole.

"Olivia, a couple things. I want to make sure you remember about the phone calls. You can only call people on the list. If you want to call people not on the list, tell me and I'll put them on the list. Make sense?"

"No." She loved saying no to Dog. "If you're going to put everybody I know on the list anyway, why do I need a list?"

"I already explained that part. It's very important that we control all information going in and out of the White House. I know these rules are difficult, but they were made for a reason. Things are different since you moved in here. You're the same person, Olivia, but you're not the same person. Everything you do now takes on a deeper significance because whether you like it or not, you represent the United States of America, and you are your actions. If there's anything you want to do that might cause problems, talk to me and I'll find a way to make it work. You have to be yourself, and that means a normal kid, so don't worry or get nervous about it. Just come talk to me anytime you feel antsy about anything, OK?"

Liv said nothing, just stared at him.

He leaned forward in his chair, staring back at her. "Look, Olivia, I'm sorry things are tough for you. You're a girl and your Mom is gone. But out there people are dying because of the decisions your father makes, so buck up and get with it, OK?"

Liv said nothing, kept staring.

"All right, if you're going to be that way, I tried, right?" He handed her a paper with names and number on it. "Here's your new phone list. Everyone's been approved. When you want to add people to the list, come to me and I'll take care of it. But please don't call anyone not on the list without telling me, OK?"

Olivia had private classes with Althea and a dozen other girls. Two agents accompanied her to school. One of them staked out the front steps, the other the hallway. Walking to class, followed at a comfortable interval by the agents, Liv told Althea about her weekend chat with Dog Dung.

"Uh-oh, Liv. You're in deep shit now."

"Why?"

"Because Dog Dung gets scared when he can't control something. Like you."

"He's not afraid of *me*."

"Oh yeah? They probably jacked up security. We're probably being watched right now. I bet they've got cameras on you every second of every day." She pointed to a fat lady walking a dog. "I bet there's a mini-cam strapped to that dog's cock. And two more strapped to her tits. And I bet Dog has one in your bathroom. Hidden in your toilet. He's got a First Girl Ass Cam."

"Shut up." Olivia laughed and punched her hard.

During class Althea passed her a note. Liv opened it and read:

*Dog Dung listens to your phone calls.
Dog Dung searches your drawers for cigarettes.
Dog Dung reads your emails.
Dog Dung checks your mouth for boys pubic hair.
Dog Dung knows what deodorant you use.
Dog Dung knows you just had your first period.
Dog Dung wants to get it doggie style from Larry.*

Liv giggled at the stupid note and her teacher glared at her. The note wasn't exactly hilarious, but she always laughed when something quite idiotic was quite true.

For her paranoia was a reality she could feel growing, every second. The reality that she was being watched.

12. *So Not-There*

On Friday at the end of their second week in the White House, President Carson was called away on an emergency. He'd be back Saturday at supper time. Olivia pretended to be concerned when he said goodbye, but the sad truth was she couldn't care less. True, she didn't want to be alone because of the weird nightmares and unpleasant feelings she couldn't quite put her finger on. But she also knew that if her father was home or away, she wouldn't tell him anyway. It sucked having a Dad everyone thought was great but who was in actual practice so not-there. In the two weeks they'd been at the White House, they'd had one meaningful conversation. In that one meaningful conversation, she was whacked hard on the ass and ran to her room crying and thinking that he should die and go to hell. The spanking was the one thing she didn't tell Althea. No way. Too humiliating.

So she was glad her Dad was gone. He was never there anyway. She was older now and didn't need him. The same way he didn't need her.

Friday night she was pretty much left alone to hang around and do whatever the hell she wanted. Bob Yung went home early (which means by eight o'clock). Rob's gun and Mrs. Bannon's breasts checked in on her a couple times each before saying goodnight and going home.

Alone with her headphones, she was blasting a hip hop CD she wasn't supposed to own but that Althea had burned for her and labeled *Frank Sinatra's Greatest Hits*. Liv was practicing gyrating her pelvis obscenely in a mirror when she realized she was famished. She looked at the clock.

Eleven minutes past eleven.

Shit. She was supposed to call down for food. But she didn't want everybody to start fussing over her which was so annoying she'd rather starve. The hell with them. She'd sneak down to the kitchen and raid the fridge. God, she could see herself turning more and more by degrees into a little teenage she-bitch.. But she couldn't help it. She was who she was. The product of a Dead Mom and a Dud Dad. She slung Larry over her shoulder, a position that always made him purr, and carried him down the Audabon hallway to the elevators. The elevator doors opened and she hit the button for the main floor.

This particular elevator, which always shuddered weirdly before it moved, had three peculiar nicks and scratches in one wall that formed in her mind the gestalt of an erect penis. Every time she saw those nicks she saw a penis and started thinking about sex. More and more her sex thoughts went straight to Frank, her stud-dream-lover-fantasy-boyfriend-bodyguard. She wondered if all White House women throughout history had been attracted to their body guards. Unless they were homosexual, like FDR's wife. Or at least that's what Althea had told her. Although she pretended she did to Althea, Liv didn't have a clue what sex was really like, but she knew it must be something incredible since the entire world seemed to revolve around it. Everything in America was drenched with sex. And Frank, her protector, was the most desirable guy in her little world, her own little Sex God. She had Frank in the teenage bedroom of her mind. And the obscene scratch marks in the elevator wall. Flashes in her mind. Frank pinning her against the elevator wall, right over the scratches. Frank making love to her and making her feel however the hell sex makes a woman feel. The penetration. The weirdness of it when Althea first told her about it. The bizarre grossness of it in Sex Ed Class. The biological breakdown, the obvious ugliness of the act and the inexperienced beauty, she guessed, she hoped, of the emotions connected to it.

Someday she'd know. And know if all this buildup was worth it. If all the strangeness and fear she felt about the sex act was justified. To Liv, sex with another person was a mundane, even disgusting, theoretical certainty, but the act itself a weird mystery of profound proportions. It was the essence of the Unknown and thus a primal source of Fear. She wanted someday to be *fucked*, but the word itself was so ugly, and she was terrified of what it might mean, of how it might change her, her body, her emotions, her personality.

The elevator opened to the main floor and she crept out, loping with Larry on her shoulder past the cameras that slowly panned in a cold arc with their red cyclops eyes across the carpets and walls. She watched the cameras and when they were pointed farthest away she slinked like a cat herself past them unseen into the darkened kitchen.

She made herself the stupidest sandwich in history. Peanut butter, banana and marshmallow spread, with one big barbecue potato chip in the middle of the goo to give it a nasty crunch. Larry stayed on her shoulder as she fed him a piece of tuna. She made a point of holding him tightly when she was around food. If he became ornery and bolted, she'd have to chase him and the whole point of her evening sneak-out would be

defeated. The camera guys would pick her up running through the rooms and they'd make a fuss. Exactly what she hated. So she held him tightly around the food to make sure he stayed put till they were safely back in her room.

But Larry scratched her hard on the neck and dove off her shoulder. She cursed, dropped half the sandwich, grabbed her neck, looked at the blood on her fingers. Son of a bitch cat. Larry bolted haughtily out of the kitchen and scampered down the hall. She ran out and saw him stop halfway down the hall and look back at her, daring her to chase him.

Larry had already had a run-in with Dog Dung. Their first night in the White House, the cat escaped from her room and ended up peeing on the four-poster in Lincoln's bedroom. The Dungarrific One, in a typical jerk move, had made her watch the surveillance video of the cat spraying the leg of Abe's antique bed. Doggie-Woggie even zoomed in to get a really close view of the pee and said that Larry was restricted to her room or outside on the lawn.

Now it was get the freakin' cat or be subjected to another of Dogarooni's pee-cam closeups.

"Larry! Get back here!" A loud whisper as she raced after him, seeing the end of his tail disappear into the Blue Room.

13. *The Blue Room*

The Blue Room is often used by Presidents to receive guests. Its blue motif includes blue wallpaper, chairs and sofa, and the blue-highlighted portraits of John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Monroe, and John Tyler. The exquisite Hannibal clock over the fireplace is a centerpiece of the Blue Room, which exudes an atmosphere of peaceful vitality and somber simplicity.

-- White House Tour Brochure

The room was dark and she flicked on the lights. A ring of lamps with blue shades lit up in a dim ring, casting a pale bluish aura over the blue and gold furnishings.

She heard Larry behind a sofa, tiptoed over the cushions, leaned over and grabbed him. But when she picked him up and turned to leave, something was blocking her way.

A tall black amorphous figure with one finger outstretched towards her. Almost touching her face.

She froze.

You, its black non-lips whispered in a non-voice. Suddenly she remembered the most terrible photo she had ever seen, a photo on a website she wished she'd never visited. It was a child ripped apart in the gears of a tractor, its body crushed into a plume of bloody gore turned black and speckled with dark flies.

You.

Feet frozen, a hundred buzzing vapid thoughts mosquitoed through her mind. She knew the satanic form did not exist. But she also knew that it was as implacable as a fucking freight train and pointing its fingerless finger straight at her.

You.

No eyes, no face, just the finger, a horrible icy radiation of hatred shooting from it to the center of her mind...a hatred of one thing... Olivia... a hatred of Olivia so intense that she trembled as the tears filled her eyes from the piercing of her heart by that black finger...laying its black seed in her mind, the seed of a black thought...that she was nothing, utterly

worthless, unloved, ugly, hated by her father...hated and abandoned by her mother ...worthless and ugly and deserves to die... deserves to be punished, tortured, raped, ripped apart by the tractor gears and sucked on by black flies.

No.

Olivia whispered it intensely at the Accuser. Like before, when she was attacked in the secret room by the hideous abominations of her violent mutilation-rape, her mind and heart were so repulsed it made her suddenly resist with incredible strength.

"No!"

Larry's hair stood on end as he hissed, scratching her badly, tearing from her arms, diving through the black form and out the door. The black thing instantly dissipated, its finger, obscenely raping her heart, vanishing last.

She was able to move, her face dark and flushed with tears from breathing without breath in utter terror.

She staggered out of the room, turning slowly as if in slow motion, like a black flower opening into the lighted hallway.

The lighted hallway.

The light embraced her face like a lapping wave and she felt the blackness drain from her. Her slow motion pinwheeling balanced and she came to a stop with a sudden feeling of relief and peace. It was as if the black Thing she had seen was in the distant past. But the peace was just as terrible as it was not real. A distant part of her mind, faintly connected, knew that something was pulling the fear from her making seducing her into a feeling of gentleness and love just as grotesque in its suddenness as had been the Accuser.

The what? Now there was no memory of what she had seen. The blackness was wiped clean and replaced with the beautiful light on the flowering wallpaper in the hall.

So beautiful. She smiled seeing Larry peering at her, sitting in front of the doorway of the Green Room.

She smiled and thought of nothing except taking him into her arms and bringing him back to her warm quiet room where they would snuggle and fall asleep together. She went towards him and Larry leapt through the doorway and into the Green Room.



[AUTHOR'S NOTE:

This PDF constitutes 1/3 of the nascent novel

SECRET ROOM.

*The novel in its entirety may be ordered
on the MAIL THIS TO ME AT ONCE page.]*