

RANK

A novel by Richard Compson Sater

Chapter One

A week of leave at Christmas had done little to reverse my impression that I was not aiming as high as the U.S. Air Force intended.

I arrived at the personnel building a few minutes after seven on the second day of the new year. As I walked through the lobby, I barely noticed the mural on the wall spelling out the mission: FLY, FIGHT, WIN.

That to-do list would have to wait.

More immediate were sixteen messages scrawled on pink slips, most marked “urgent,” taped to my office door. Inside, the phone answering machine blinked on and off, informing me of forty-one new voice mails. A stack of airman performance evaluations to complete and award nomination packages to revise and submit sat where I’d left it on my desk.

I hung up my coat and hat and sank into the chair. Out of habit, I logged onto the computer. My inbox contained two hundred and thirty-five unread emails, over half of them red-flagged as important. According to my appointment book, the morning was already shot, reenlistments and retirement counseling from eight until noon. Four dreary meetings, back to back, would likewise kill the afternoon. Tomorrow was similarly full, and the next day. How had the Air Force gotten along without me for an entire week?

I affixed a fresh calendar to the wall with dull certainty that the new year would be just like the old one. Not for the first time, I brooded about my decision to seek a commission in the Air Force as a solution to a post-graduate school career going nowhere. After high school, I’d tried the enlisted route, and that little adventure hadn’t panned out as promised, either. What made me think the officer recruiter would be any more trustworthy than the enlisted one?

The military personnel field was hardly the target I’d had in mind, and my position as deputy chief of personnel was as impressive and interesting as its name suggests. The glamour-and-excitement quotient registered zero, but I suppose the Air Force can only do so much with a recruit holding a master’s degree in American literature.

I still owed three and a half years against my four-year commitment. Would I ever reach the flying, fighting, and winning part?

Certainly not today. I headed for the break room in search of motivation. Perhaps our chief master sergeant had brought doughnuts, but no luck. And no coffee either, an ongoing stalemate. Everyone drank it, but it was never anyone’s turn to make it. Maybe I could brew a pot and start the new year with an unselfish gesture of goodwill toward my fellow airmen and colleagues.

Right.

I boiled a mug of water in the microwave and stirred in a spoonful of dark-roast instant. Back at my desk, I sipped carefully and wondered if enough caffeine could somehow dispel my winter's discontent. I surveyed the pile on my desk, uncertain where to begin. Get organized, I told myself, stern. Buckle down. Eliminate the most tedious tasks first. Get them out of the way so they aren't hanging over your head all week.

That resolution cooled as quickly as my coffee.

At half past seven, the chief unlocked the waiting-room door, and we were open for business. At the same moment, the phone rang. Inwardly, I recoiled, and very nearly let the answering machine pick up instead. Regardless of my frame of mind, I wouldn't be able to ignore it indefinitely, however. I picked up the receiver.

"Air Base Wing Office of Personnel. Good morning. Lieutenant Mitchell speaking. How may I help you?"

I'd answered the phone that way too many times to muster even a spark of enthusiasm. Quite possibly, I did not actually *want* to be of assistance.

"Second Lieutenant Harris Mitchell?" a deep voice barked. I detected a hint of a Southern drawl. Where had I heard that voice before?

"Speaking."

"General O'Neill here."

I drew a blank, offering a tentative "Um, who?" Clearly an unsatisfactory response.

First, a noisy, impatient exhale, then he said, "U.S. Air Force Brigadier General Seamus O'Neill. Your boss's boss's boss, Lieutenant."

Rudeness was not a habit with me, but I was in no mood for jokes. Why would the commander of Sixth Air Force call me?

"Oh, come on," I said. "It's too early in the day for prank calls."

The blowback from the other end of the line nearly singed my hair. Making any more assumptions would not be smart, particularly if he *was* in fact the Sixth Air Force commander. I apologized profusely.

"I want you in my office at 0745 hours, sharp," he said.

I glanced at the clock. I had thirteen minutes. At least the headquarters building was close by.

"Yes, sir. Is there anything else I can do for you, sir?"

“Be on time,” he said, hanging up before I could ask any of the questions that immediately crowded my mind. What did he want? Was I in trouble? Had I been guilty of some breach of courtesy, or worse? How was it possible, when I’d never met the man?

I’d seen him but once, six months back, at the newcomer’s briefing required of all personnel assigned to the base. I recollected a tall, rangy man in dress blues with an impressive mustache that clearly exceeded the Air Force regulation size limit. He’d welcomed us to the unit with a short speech delivered in a countrified accent, his deep voice weaving together a string of clichés about duty, honor, and patriotism with complete and mesmerizing conviction. He was in and out of the room in ten minutes.

I had been sufficiently intrigued to make a detailed examination of his official photo, part of the portrait gallery in the main hallway of the headquarters building. Each framed eight-by-ten had a brass plate identifying the name and position of our leaders, from the wing commanders all the way to the President of the United States, Commander in Chief. I noted General O’Neill was a handsome man up close, and then I’d promptly forgotten about him.

An unexpected directive from a one-star general could certainly shake off one’s new-year lethargy, at least temporarily. The clock reminded me three more minutes had ticked away. I grabbed my jacket and hat and stopped by my supervisor’s office.

“What’s up, L.T.?”

“I’m not sure, Major Beckett. I’ve just been summoned to General O’Neill’s office.”

“What kind of mischief have you gotten yourself into now, L.T.?”

This stereotype about second lieutenants surfaces at the least provocation. As a breed, we couldn’t possibly be as inept and ignorant as we are often painted, nor as guilty. I’d developed a thin skin about the kidding, so naturally, I was a frequent target.

“He doesn’t even know me! I saw him once, at the newcomer’s orientation briefing last year when he gave us a pep talk.”

“He’s famous for that.”

“Why would he want to see me? I don’t get it.”

“You will, especially if you’re late.” He checked his watch. “You got, like, seven minutes.”

“I have a senior master sergeant coming in at eight to process her retirement paperwork, and three reenlistments after that,” I said.

“We’ll cover,” Major Beckett said. As I headed out the door, he yelled “L.T.! Wait!”

I backtracked, a little alarmed. “What is it?”

He grinned. “Happy New Year, L.T.” Really? I tried to formulate a suitable retort. “Run,” he said.

I felt like an errant student being called in to see the principal as I raced to the headquarters building. I stopped in the restroom briefly to make sure my tie was straight, thankful I'd worn a clean and pressed shirt that morning. I also took a moment to catch my breath and reinspect General O'Neill's official photo.

Under different circumstances, he might have made a fine pin-up.

I marched into the staff suite with a minute to spare and found him in the outer office, talking with a secretary. I came to attention as I waited for him to acknowledge me, close enough so he could see me but distant enough to get a good look at him.

My ill humor vanished, and even the dread subsided a bit.

The portrait in the hall didn't half do him justice. He wore the standard haircut, cropped short, his hair still mostly jet-black but streaked haphazardly with gray. Only his bushy eyebrows and even bushier mustache remained stubbornly true to their original color. Under the black push broom, in his teeth, he clamped the stem of a pipe. It wasn't currently lit, although a faint and pleasant rum-and-maple aroma in the air suggested he did not strictly heed the base's no-smoking indoors policy. Given his clearly robust constitution, one would never guess smoking could be detrimental to good health.

I noticed immediately how well the flight suit hung on his lanky six-foot-plus frame. I also noted idly he wore no wedding band, only an ostentatious ring on his right hand that announced an Air Force Academy pedigree. The south stretched across his loping drawl like a warm blanket covering a bed. A voice like his could lull me to sleep or arouse me fully.

His pieces fit in a most pleasing assemblage.

The general turned to me abruptly, short-circuiting my reverie, and extended his right hand. I returned his firm grip. I liked the way his brown eyes looked into mine, and the approval reflected in his when I refused to look away. I found no censure in his gaze, and that eased my mind as well.

"My aide position is vacant. I need to fill it immediately, Lieutenant Mitchell," he said.

"Yes, sir."

That was it? I was an aide-de-camp candidate? He might have warned me. It would have saved me a little sweat, if not exactly tears and blood. I wondered immediately why he had singled me out, less than a year after my commission, since a one-star general usually rated a first lieutenant or even a captain as his aide. Besides, the position was not only subservient by definition but also very conspicuous, with a high potential for blundering, the last thing a second lieutenant needed.

Would I be given the option to decline?

He walked all the way around me, inspecting. I stood up a little straighter and held my breath. He came to a stop in front of me again and crossed his arms. "This isn't an interrogation," he said. "Stand at ease."

I exhaled and relaxed my posture a little. “Yes, sir.”

“Who’s your boss?” he demanded.

“Major Beckett. Dan Beckett, commander of the personnel flight.”

“Who’s *his* boss?”

So actually it *was* an interrogation. The personnel flight fell under the support group, and I’d interacted with the commander frequently: “Lieutenant Colonel Margaret Corelli.”

“Her boss?”

The support group came under the wing. “That’s Colonel…Abrahms.” His first name escaped me.

“His?”

Our wing, and three others, fell under the Numbered Air Force, in our case, Sixth. “That’s you, sir.” If he went any farther, I would run out of answers.

He did. “Mine?”

I wished immediately I’d paid more attention to the other photos in the leadership portrait gallery. I couldn’t even picture the man who was one step above General O’Neill, let alone recall his name. My silence prompted the next logical question. “My boss’s boss?” A heavy, sad sigh came before he asked, “Who’s the Secretary of the Air Force?” Silence. “Jesus. Can you at least name the Commander in Chief?”

“Oh, yes, sir. Of course. The President of the United States.” If every prospective aide underwent similar grilling, how many fared well enough to be hired?

“How can you work for an organization when you don’t even know who’s in charge?”

He had a valid point. However, we all take some things for granted. A framed poster on the wall behind the secretary’s desk reminded me of the Air Force core values, which I *had* committed to memory and which did matter to me: integrity, service before self, excellence in all things.

I indicated the poster. “Right there, sir. The core values make sense to me. They’re good practices, no matter what you do for a living. That’s a code of conduct I can respect, and the kind of organization I’m proud to serve.”

The general nodded. “Good save, Lieutenant.” He cleared his throat. “I’m sure you know what a Numbered Air Force is, and why the NAFs are critical to the mission of the United States Air Force.”

“Oh, yes. Certainly, sir.”

“Mmm-hmm,” the general said. “A NAF is a tactical organization with an operational focus consisting of two or more air wings, grouped with smaller auxiliary units, forming a large striking organization to

provide one major aspect of air strength—either airlift, with cargo planes, or refueling capability with tankers, or tactical defense, with bombers and fighters.”

“Yes, sir.” I was not, in fact, up to speed on the finer points of the NAF structure and mission. I was grateful he chose to lecture rather than ask more questions I couldn’t have answered to his satisfaction.

“The NAFs, running consecutively from First Air Force through Twenty-Fifth Air Force, form the senior war-fighting echelon of the U.S. Air Force. As commander of Sixth Air Force, I oversee nine active-duty air wings spread out across nine installations,” he said. “That’s nearly one hundred twenty-eight thousand acres of real estate, incidentally. Each wing consists of four or five groups. There are sixty-seven squadrons under those groups, comprised of eighteen thousand six hundred forty-three airmen. In addition to y’all, I’m responsible for seven hundred thirty-nine civilians, including my invaluable secretary, Linda Swanson here.”

The invaluable Linda Swanson rolled her eyes. I suspected she’d heard this before.

“Our mission is to facilitate the training, equipping, and deployment of assigned units in support of Air Mobility Command,” he said. “I own three hundred fifty-two cargo aircraft, the C-5 Galaxy, the C-130 Hercules, and the C-17 Globemaster. Currently, eighty-one of my airframes are involved in one way or another with the Global War on Terrorism. I’ve got two hundred seventy-seven airmen deployed to various points around the globe, including ninety-eight on the ground in Afghanistan. I have a lot on my plate.”

I didn’t doubt it.

“A general casts a long shadow,” he said. “A good general casts a longer one. I make every effort to be the best general I can be. I accept my responsibilities wholeheartedly. I take them seriously, and I expect y’all to do the same. I set high but attainable standards. I’m quick to praise a job well done and equally ready to criticize when I see a problem. I make the best decisions I can, based on the facts tempered with judicial opinion and honed by thirty years of service in the United States Air Force.”

His decisions weren’t the only thing honed by thirty years of service. I suspect he’d given this speech numerous times before. It was too detailed, too practiced, to be extemporaneous, and his performance was flawless.

“I need an aide who can manage a general with that much responsibility. Are you the man, Lieutenant Mitchell?”

“I am, sir.” I sounded much more confident than I felt. I had no idea what an aide actually did, but suddenly I wanted the job very much.

“Very good.” He steered me into his office, offered me a chair, and sat down himself. My personnel file was spread out on his desk. He picked up the pile of documents and then set it down again, clearly dissatisfied.

“Where the hell are my glasses?”

Linda entered the office, murmuring with apparent disapproval under her breath as she handed him a pair of reading glasses and then left us alone again. He shuffled through my file, reviewing each page before setting the stack of paper aside.

“Second Lieutenant Harris Alfred Langdon Mitchell,” he said. “That offers nearly endless possibilities.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “That was my mom’s idea, one middle name from each of my grandfathers.”

“What a stirring tribute,” he said, his tone suggesting nothing of the sort. “You’re prior enlisted.”

“Yes, sir. Four years, just after high school.”

“What brought you into the service?”

I could hardly implicate my high school trigonometry teacher, upon whom I had a deep and serious crush during my senior year. A reservist himself, he regularly told us tales of his adventures on deployment during Operation Desert Storm a decade earlier. Up to that point, I’d never even considered the military, but he encouraged me when I showed interest. The attacks of September 11, 2001—which occurred during my senior year—actually convinced me to take the big step. When I brought up the subject of military service with my friends, however, most of them jeered, convinced that I’d never survive the rigors of basic training, particularly since I’d come out very publicly that same year.

My bluff having been called, I talked with a local recruiter, and he offered me a slot as a photographer. I liked the job description; at that time, the recruiter couldn’t ask and I didn’t tell, so I signed on the dotted line for a four-year commitment. A month later, I was on a plane from Columbus to San Antonio and Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. Basic training lasted six weeks and proved moderately strenuous but not particularly difficult, even for an airman prohibited from telling. I’d even earned the designation of honor graduate as well as the Small Arms Expert Marksmanship ribbon.

I completed my bachelor’s degree concurrent with my four-year enlistment, working as a reservist one weekend a month and two weeks in the summer, eager to do my bit for the Global War on Terrorism, camera in hand. I discovered I had some talent and a good eye for composition, too.

Unfortunately, digital photography completely overtook the career field early in my term of service. We no longer processed film in a darkroom, and all photo editing and printing were done via computer. I took little satisfaction in it; by my estimation, the art and craft were gone. I missed spending hours in the “soup” to achieve the perfect print.

“Old-school,” the general said. “Very good. Is that why you didn’t reenlist?”

My decision had been based primarily on the fact that my unit, a fighter wing, was never called to serve in Afghanistan or Iraq, though we trained accordingly. I waited for the promised deployment but it never came, and my patriotic fervor cooled rather quickly. The breakup of a year-long relationship with one of my college English professors coincided with the arrival of my reenlistment papers in the mail. All things considered, I chose not to re-up and enrolled in graduate school instead, concluding my unexceptional enlisted career at the rank of senior airman. I didn’t feel obligated to share *all* this information with the general, however, so I sketched only the relevant facts.

Several years of teaching four literature courses per semester at a community college dimmed my fervor for academia as well. Desperate for a change of pace and scenery, I'd visited the Air Force officer recruiter and applied for officer training when school let out for the summer. One thing had changed about the military since my enlisted days, and it made all the difference. I could accept a commission only because "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was about to fall and I'd be able to serve out in the open.

General O'Neill would find out anyway, if he didn't already know, and I preferred that he'd hear it from me. When he asked what had brought me back to the service after six years' absence, I told him. "The repeal of 'Don't Ask, Don't Tell.'"

He made direct eye contact on that, and his eyebrows went up, too. So there was at least one thing he couldn't extract about me from my personnel file.

"In theory or in practice?" he said.

"Both, sir."

He may have been shocked or at least startled, but he gave nothing away. I hoped my being out would not hurt my chances. He continued leafing through the pages in my file until he reached the last one, then straightened the stack and closed the folder.

"Tell me what a deputy director for personnel does all day to improve quality of life for my airmen."

I outlined my routine for General O'Neill: the endless paperwork, phone calls, emails, meetings. I stayed busy all day, but the actual quality-of-life impact seemed questionable. The general agreed.

"Sounds like you're bored stupid," he said. "Do you like the service?"

"Yes, sir." It was true, regardless of my new-year crisis not an hour earlier. "I just don't feel as if I'm exactly flying, fighting, or winning right now."

He nodded. "That'll do, Lieutenant Mitchell," he said. I stood to leave. "Should I check your teeth and thump your belly?" An easy grin lurked beneath the mustache.

He could put his hands on me anytime. "Maybe you'd better, sir," I said. "Just in case."

He arched an eyebrow. "I'll take a rain check."

As soon as the interview was over, I steered past the chain-of-command photo gallery and made note of the general's boss and the rest of the group under the President. I jotted down the names and put the paper in my back pocket. The information might come in handy at some point.

My next stop was Julia Waterston's office. She was the general's chief of public affairs as well as my best friend. We'd even dated briefly when I'd first been assigned to the base the previous summer, before she let on that she'd known all along about my preferences. We grew even closer after that, sharing every confidence and even comparing notes about our dream date. Mine was older, mustached,

and furry-chested in addition to the requisite tall, dark, and handsome. She'd immediately suggested, jokingly, I'd assumed, that her boss met all my specifications.

And now I might be working for the very man. Perhaps Julia would have the lowdown regarding my mysterious summons to his office.

"You'll never guess where I've been," I told her.

She was grinning. "How did your interview go?"

Ah. It all made sense. How else would the general have known about me? "You might have asked me if I had any interest in being a general's aide," I said. "Or at least given me a warning."

"You would have said no, Harris." I moved to protest, but she shook her head. "You need a challenge. The personnel office is crushing your soul."

True, perhaps, but even so. "He called me this morning and ordered me to show up at his office in fifteen minutes with no explanation. I was sure I'd done something wrong, but didn't have any idea what it was."

"General O'Neill asked for my recommendation, and you were the only one who came to mind," she said.

Julia's word would carry some weight. Part of the reason she got along so well with the general was that they had both graduated from the Air Force Academy, though twenty-five years apart. Still, it gave them some common ground. Few around the NAF had a similar pedigree.

"I'll bet he interviews a dozen guys for the job," I said. "Why would he pick me?"

"I'd say you have a very good chance, Harris."

"In other words, if I get the job, it'll be your fault."

"Don't look at it that way," she said. "Think of it as a lottery ticket. You just might win the grand prize."

Years ago, I discovered the curious fact that straight men flirt with each other all the time, subconsciously, a game they play with a kind of I-dare-you subtext. I'm always amused to see a presumably straight man behave so damnably queer, but I can't say I haven't gotten my hopes up on occasion. I couldn't shake the impression General O'Neill had been flirting with me during the interview, and it was a pleasant sensation alongside the physical proximity of a handsome man. I wondered for the rest of that day and all of the next if I'd pass muster. Imagine working alongside such a boss!

From the Air Force Link website, I downloaded General O'Neill's military biography. It contained little beyond the facts, nothing about the man behind them. I learned that he was a native of Tennessee and that he'd started his military career thirty years earlier with his graduation from the U.S. Air Force

Academy in Colorado Springs—first in his class, no less. He'd been flying cargo aircraft throughout his career, racking up more than ten thousand hours in the air. He'd held a number of command positions and accumulated an impressive rack of campaign ribbons, including tours of duty in Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, and Iraq, as well as medals for various achievements.

Anything else I would have to learn firsthand.

Two days later, General O'Neill made an unannounced visit to the personnel office. Someone shouted "Attention!" so he had a good-sized audience. He was, he said, sorry to report that I was apparently the best he could do on short notice. He warned me that the position would be mine for a single year, as general's aide was not a career but only a career-broadening tour. Afterward, I could return to the personnel office or opt to retrain into a different career field. In spite of Julia's confidence, I was astonished and thrilled he chose me.

After the handshaking, Major Beckett sent everyone back to work and pulled the general aside. "Can I talk to you for a minute, sir?"

The general nodded and followed the major into his office. The door closed and some earnest conversation went on behind it. I could guess the gist, although I couldn't hear the words, only the rise and fall of their voices and some apparently sharp words from the general. At least I'd beaten Major Beckett to the draw. I had a good idea what he was telling the general.

The door opened abruptly, and the general strode out alone. "You've got until Friday to conclude your business here, Lieutenant Mitchell," he said. "I'll see you at 0715 sharp next Monday."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir." And he was gone.

My first thought was to contact his secretary and find out if she had any good advice for a new aide. All she would tell me, however, was "be on time." After a little research, I located my predecessor, one Thomas Drake, a new captain, settling into a deputy position in our security police unit. I tracked him down and told him I'd been selected as the new aide.

"Man, who did *you* piss off?" he said.

Uh-oh.

He needed no urging to continue. "General O'Neill is a total asshole. He'll ask you to do anything he can think of. One time he sent me all over hell and back because he ran out of pipe tobacco. I had to drive to the mall on my lunch hour to get the kind he wanted," he said. "I was in trouble, like, all the time. Usually it wasn't even my fault, but he'd pile on the shit anyway. In front of other staff officers! Over two months I worked for the son of a bitch, and he couldn't even remember my name. Called me 'Dickweed' or 'Meathead' or some stupid thing."

Captain Drake detailed the general's quirks and weaknesses at length: his demanding nature, his insistence on punctuality, his attention to detail, the long hours, even his fondness for opera.

The captain rolled his eyes after outlining that particular addiction. “It’s *so gay*,” he said.

With effort, I kept my mouth shut, but he didn’t even notice. I was beginning to rethink the strategy of pumping him for insight. A good twenty minutes passed, filled with colorful illustrations, before the captain wrapped up his diatribe with “Good luck, man.”

“Thanks, Captain Drake. I think.” We shook hands.

“When do you pin on first lieutenant, Mitchell?”

“I’m eligible in six months, but probably not until next year.”

He shook his head. “You’ll be eaten alive.”

So my new boss was unreasonable. At least, I told myself, he was a good-looking man, although I wondered—not for the first time—if showing my pink wouldn’t get me in trouble one of these days.

I headed next for Julia’s office, just as I had after my initial interview. I got right to the point. “What kind of boss is General O’Neill?”

“You got hired? Harris, that’s fantastic! Congratulations!”

“Maybe,” I said. “What’s the real lowdown?”

“Harris, I’ve been telling tales about General O’Neill ever since we met!”

“I know. But I never thought I’d be working for him five days a week, all day long.”

She laughed. “You got a couple of hours?” She invited me into her office, offered me a chair and a soda, and we settled in for a chat.

“He’s spoiled,” she said. “What do you expect? He’s a general. He’s used to getting his own way. When colonels become generals, they become more and more isolated. The layers of protection around them get thicker. Generals get removed even further from reality because no one ever says ‘no’ to them anymore. But he’s got a lot of responsibility. Did you get the Grand Recitation?”

“You mean the one about the nine hundred aircraft and forty thousand people and fifty million acres of land he’s responsible for?”

Julia laughed. “I guess you did. Everyone on his staff hears it at some point. In spite of the chest-thumping, there’s a lot of truth to what he says. He needs good people around him who can help him get the job done.”

From a public affairs standpoint, he was perfect, she said, fully aware of the value of good community relations and willing to do his part. “He’s a terrific speaker in front of any audience. Very media-savvy,

too. Reporters love him because he's sincere and straightforward and well-spoken. And photogenic. He comes across fantastic on TV," she said. "He makes my job that much easier."

She continued. "He's smart. He listens when you talk to him, but you better get right to the point. Once you prove you know your job, you earn his respect and keep it. I like that. But he's a general, and generals get to be difficult if they want. I get tired of hearing 'because I'm a general' when someone asks him for a reason about anything. But I think he's a good commander and a genuinely nice guy under all the bluster. I couldn't ask for a better boss."

"His last aide would disagree with you," I said. "I just talked to him. He thinks the general is a real...um...asshole."

Julia snorted. "Tom Drake is an idiot. He barely lasted two months on the job," she said.

"Maybe I should talk to the guy before him," I said. "Who was that?"

"I can't even remember," Julia said. "There's been a revolving door on the aide position for the last two years. Did you know you're the fifth one since General O'Neill became commander?"

I gulped. What kind of boss goes through five aides in two years? Was it too late for me to retract my acceptance? "Why do you think I've got a better chance than any of the other ones?"

"Trust me, Harris. It will be a great fit for you," she said. "This place is like a carnival that never ends, complete with freak show and a midway full of rigged games. The general runs the roller coaster himself, and you're in for the ride of your life."

If I could hang on.

Chapter Two

I admit I'm not the best time manager. I mean well but too often, my best intentions get sideswiped. As a concession to my new job, I determined to develop better habits in that regard, particularly since I'd been warned to be prompt. Over the weekend, I readied myself. Got a haircut and trimmed my mustache carefully. Starched and pressed my best blue shirt and aligned my nametag and ribbons evenly. On Sunday night, I set my alarm clock half an hour earlier than usual and put it across the bedroom so I couldn't reach over and hit the snooze button. I had little else to do Monday morning besides shave and shower and eat my cornflakes over the sink.

As I knotted my tie and surveyed my appearance in the bathroom mirror, I was confident I'd make a good impression. I hopped into my old Toyota a half hour earlier than usual, on track to make my 0715 appointment in front of the general's desk with many minutes to spare. Instead of the morning news, my usual companion on the daily commute, I slipped a club-mix CD into the player, a little high-energy dance music to put me in good spirits. Until I had to hit the brakes.

A jackknifed semi-truck on the highway blocked traffic in both directions. My upbeat mood evaporated and twenty minutes ticked by before I could extricate myself from the mess. With no other option, I

detoured several miles along back roads at unsafe speeds to reach the base. I skidded into the office about five minutes late. At least I had the satisfaction of a solid excuse. Or so I thought.

The general was speaking with Linda. I came to attention a respectful distance away. Finally, he turned to me.

“My instructions specified 0715.”

“I apologize, sir. I left home in plenty of time, but—”

“My instructions specified 0715. Did they not?” He spoke each word more distinctly and louder, as if perhaps I hadn’t heard him before.

“Yes, sir.”

He pulled a watch from his pocket, an old silver timepiece ticking audibly, hanging on a chain. He snapped the case open and consulted it. “It’s now 0723.”

“I’m sorry, sir. There was an accident—”

“I don’t give a damn!” he thundered. “You’re late!”

“Yes, sir. I’m sorry, sir.” My antiperspirant would earn its money this morning.

“You may set a land-speed record for the fastest trip in and out of the aide position. Is that your intent?” I’m sure he could be heard halfway down the hall.

“No, sir.” Underneath the general’s admonishment, I was faintly aware of Linda clucking her tongue. I couldn’t tell if she was expressing sympathy or disgust. She had warned me, after all.

He sighed and pointed to his office, its door wide open. “In there.”

I went in and stood at attention in front of his desk, awaiting his entrance. He kept me standing there for a good ten minutes. My confidence wilted as the seconds ticked by, and my T-shirt was soggy under the arms by the time the general came in and took his seat.

Finally, he motioned for me to do the same.

“I’d rather be an hour early than a minute late,” he said.

“Yes, sir.”

“I’m not angry at you, but when I say 0715 and you agree, we’ve made a pact. Your word is your bond, Timepiece.”

“Yes, sir.” I vowed to myself never to be late again, even if it meant leaving home the night before to ensure I’d have plenty of time for contingency routing if necessary.

“Who’s my boss?” he said.

Relief washed over me. I’d committed the names to memory over the weekend, just in case. “General Raymond E. Johns Jr. at Air Mobility Command Headquarters.”

“And his boss?”

“Air Force Chief of Staff General Norman Schwartz, who reports directly to the President.”

“Consider your ass saved. Coffee?”

Whew. What could go wrong with serving coffee? I stood again. “Yes, sir. Cream or sugar?”

He waved me back into the chair. “Do you *drink* it?”

Oh. Hmm... “Yes, sir.”

“Good. I don’t trust a man who can’t enjoy a good cup of coffee. How do you take it?”

“Cream,” I said. “No sugar.”

He disappeared. In his absence, I took my first good look around his office. An elegant walnut desk and credenza reflected good taste as well as his high position. Shelves crowded with books and memorabilia of a long career—model airplanes, trophies, insignia and other small souvenirs—were nonetheless exceptionally well ordered. A leather couch and matching chairs surrounded a coffee table with ornate carved legs. On its top were a neatly fanned selection of military and aviation magazines and an oversize Air Force history picture book. On the wall, instead of the usual aircraft prints and proof of military accomplishment, the general had opted for handsomely framed Monet and Van Gogh reproductions instead.

I could hear music playing low, a soprano expressing her fervent opinion about something or other. The tune sounded familiar. I located the stereo, a top-of-the-line brand, and a rack next to it crammed with compact discs. From my seat, I could make out some of the names on the CD spines: Mozart, Bizet, Wagner, Verdi, Puccini. The general returned a moment later with two steaming mugs, and he handed one to me.

“That’s quite a music library you have there, sir.”

He arched an eyebrow. “And Maria Callas is your favorite singer,” he said.

“Well, sir, I don’t know much about the performers, but my mom is a big opera fan, so I heard a lot of it at home,” I said. “That sounds like it could be Puccini.”

“It is. *Turandot*. Very good.” He sounded equally pleased and incredulous. “I’d like to meet your mom someday. None of the heathens around this place appreciate good music.”

He rummaged in his desk drawers for something, muttering under his breath until he produced a crumpled pouch of tobacco. He dug into his pocket for a pipe, tamped it full, lit it carefully with a wooden match, and then he directed his full attention to my aide lessons.

“I drink coffee all day long,” he said. “One cube of sugar per cup. The box is next to the coffee pot.” I gathered he would not be bringing me coffee hereafter. We sipped in silence for a minute, eyeing each other over the rims of the mugs. As on our first meeting, I refused to look away. His eyebrows went up, and he finally grinned.

“You talked to your immediate predecessor?” he said.

“I did, sir.”

“Did he tell you I’m a prick?” He smirked.

“Oh, no, sir. Of course not.”

He grinned. “Liar. But I’ll give you points for loyalty to a brother officer. What’s your impression?”

I answered honestly. “Too soon to tell, sir.”

“Good answer. Caution is a virtue. First impressions can kick your ass. Are you a quick study?”

“Yes, sir, if the subject interests me.”

“Does it?”

I suspected it would, but caution being a virtue, I gave him the same too-soon-to-tell answer, and he liked it just as well the second time.

“Do you learn from your mistakes?”

“Yes, sir. Mistakes are good teachers,” I said. “If you don’t make mistakes, how much time are you going to spend examining your process to see how you can improve it?”

He liked that, too. “You’ll do, Sparkplug. Major Beckett didn’t think you would be a good candidate for this job.”

“Yes, sir. And I’ll bet I know why.”

“You do, eh?”

“He wanted to make sure you knew I was gay, didn’t he?”

“He did. But I already knew that.”

“Yes, sir. But I’m sure Major Beckett thought you wouldn’t want your aide to be gay.”

“He was most insistent about it,” he said.

“Thank you for giving me a chance, sir.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Speak your mind and be straight with me—er, so to speak,” he said. “We’ll get along fine.”

We stood and shook hands. He appeared to harbor no lingering ill will for my tardiness, for which I was truly thankful. He seemed like a different man from the one who’d dressed me down so thoroughly for being five minutes late.

“One more thing,” he said. I waited, expectant. “What kind of softball player are you?”

I knew the general was first baseman on the NAF team. Its last-place rank in the base league was a standing joke, in fact. As for me, I hadn’t played softball since high school as part of the mandatory physical education program. I’d been useless then, with no opportunity or desire to improve.

“I suck, sir.”

“You’re on the team anyway, Electrolux.”

“Yes, sir.”

Being a general’s aide might be more complicated than I’d realized. But with snow on the ground and spring three months away, I wouldn’t concern myself with softball. He sat down again and turned his attention to a report on his desk, annotating it with a red pen. Left-handed, too. I stood before him, awaiting instruction, and a full minute passed before he seemed to notice.

“Are you still here?” he barked. “What the hell are you waiting for, Sawbuck? Get to work!” The ghost of a smile lurked beneath his mustache.

The carnival had begun.

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