

TERMINAL NEGLECT

A novel

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Acknowledgments

Terminal Neglect began as a non-fiction story. Initially, it was to be about my personal journey after being diagnosed with cancer almost six years ago. My roller coaster ride since that awful day of being told the diagnosis has been rocky, to say the least. Three years ago, I decided to write *Terminal Neglect* as a fictional story highlighting the critical importance of living out our dreams in the brief time that we all have on this planet and to show how each of us can make a difference to make this a better world.

My special gratitude goes to Francine, my wife and best friend of thirty three years. She not only has been there every second since day one but she has been my principal sounding board in writing this novel. As an avid reader, Francine has been enormously instrumental in assisting me every step of the way in testing storylines that work, and in formulating character development through countless revisions. Our children have been a source of incredible inspiration for this story of an idealistic physician who fights the evil doers in doing what he believes is the right thing to do. Many thanks to Jennifer and Jeffrey and especially to Mark for providing ideas to keep me going when the next chapter page was blank.

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I dedicate this book to Francine, my wife and love of my life, and to our amazing children, Jennifer, Mark, and Jeff. Your enduring support of my dreams enables the good in all of us to eternally triumph.

Prologue

Beth Murphy sped away from Mercy Hospital, her eyes blinking back tears as she headed for the airport. Sam was the only hero she had ever known, and now he was undergoing a last round of chemotherapy. She hoped that it would save him. Beth owed him everything. Her sorrow crushed her. She remembered the day her father aimed a double-barreled shotgun at her face, his finger about to squeeze the trigger. What happened next was a dark secret that she shared only with Sam. The rental car steering wheel shook in her hands. It had all seemed like yesterday.

Thirty minutes later, she pulled into the parking lot at Detroit Metro Airport. She mindlessly passed through the security checkpoints. Beth looked forward to returning to DC. It was Sam's workshop. It was where he was well known as a dedicated champion of patient rights and drug safety. A tenured member of the Board, he battled the drug companies through the oversight process at National Quality.

In recent visits to Mercy, Beth heard Sam repeat, for at least the nineteenth time, that her short stint on the Board at the drug safety review company was simply to keep his seat warm until he recovered from his recent cancer flare-up. She recalled his passionate belief that many ill-informed, underage, and desperate souls took risky experimental drugs in clinical trials just for the money, offering themselves as potential sacrificial lambs on the altar of rapacious drug companies.

Sam realized that he had become a lightning rod, attracting hostility from most members of the Board. Yet he was always more than willing to take any risk by speaking out to protect an unsuspecting population that seemed to have no other champion. Beth believed that she too was on a mission to save lives just as Sam had once saved hers. As the jet sped down the runway, the tears returned. She hoped that he would be released soon from Mercy Hospital. It was obvious to her that the country needed

someone like Sam to fight against greedy drug barons. In a few hours, she would be landing at Reagan. She slowly drifted off, taking comfort that she would not be alone in their life-long quest to save innocent lives.



Sam had been heartened by Beth's visit. She was his future. He had painstakingly groomed her to be his replacement. Even before his own well-publicized trial for the murder of her father, and his adoption of her, he believed in his gut that she had the spunk to make things happen. He pictured her face, so alive with promise; everything about her demonstrated an unquenchable thirst for justice. After what had happened to her—how she was used by the drug companies for the testing of dangerous drugs—he could understand that hunger. But somehow she hadn't turned her hate on the man who put her in that danger—her own father. She had feared him, but still forgave him. Sam prayed that he was burning in hell. Beth just wanted to put the crooks in government, medicine, and the pharmaceutical companies in jail. Sam understood her rage.

His mind wandered as he gazed at his own emaciated body. He knew his days were numbered. It would be Beth who would have to carry his torch. His own daughter, Penny, was gone . . . but that was a nightmare he couldn't revisit. The image of her lifeless body, swinging at the end of the rope . . . not now, not lying here with a needle in his arm, connecting him to the fluids that were, at least temporarily, keeping him alive.

The intravenous pole kept him from turning freely in bed. He felt restless, despite the sleeping pill he'd been given, and dreaded going to sleep. He feared that his nightly demons would once again pay their customary visit in his dreams.

Sam jerked when he heard a solitary footstep at the doorway. He smelled a fresh whiff of cigarette smoke.

"Who's there? Nurse?" But he sensed that it wasn't his nurse. There was something different, something sinister about the presence.

Sam reached for his bedside reading penlight but it rolled off the hospital tray. He lunged for it and fell out of the far side of his bed. A tumbling pillow absorbed some of the force from his plunge onto the black-and-white hospital tiles, but the fall caused the needle to pull from his arm, shearing his skin. Bewildered, he sat on the hospital floor behind his gurney barricade.

He felt something pressing into his buttocks, and found he was sitting on the penlight. He aimed the narrow beam skyward. The stream of light bounced off the face of his intruder. Sam inhaled the cigarette aroma worn by the visitor as it splashed downward.

Barely two feet away from him, the intruder whispered, "My friend, it's time." The voice was soft. Sam couldn't tell if it was from a man or woman.

"Time for what?"

"Don't go there."

The visitor wore an oversized baseball cap and a green Mardi Gras-type mask. The false-looking gray beard covered the intruder's jawline. The figure was no taller than Sam's own five-foot-seven stature, and slimly built.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" Sam stammered.

"You don't remember me?"

Sam frantically peered up at the figure. "Wait a minute. Those eyes . . ."

"Listen, old man, this plan is bigger than us. We can't stop this from happening."

Sam spoke with a quiver in his voice. "What plan? Stop what?"

But then something connected. The pieces jelled. Sam felt his bowels turn to liquid. "No," he cried. "Not you, of all people!"

"Afraid so. You know, we don't like whistleblowers."

"But I trusted you all these years."

"Never again, my friend."

The visitor backed away from the foul odor and cursed loudly. "Damn, no matter how much time I spend in a hospital, I'll never get used to that god-awful smell."

"Where is my doctor?" Sam demanded.

“You flunked your tryout for The Health Club. And, as far as your doctor is concerned, he’s not on call tonight.”

“What club?” Sam felt his heart pounding so loud that he strained to hear a response.

“Sorry, membership is by invitation only.”

Sam heaved himself back to bed by tugging fiercely on the sheets. Now separated from his visitor by less than a yard, the nurse call button was still a foot away. He made a quick lunge for it, but his arthritic wrists suffered a well-placed chop by the visitor.

He was stunned and exhausted. Sam barely noticed the twenty cc syringe that was being inserted into the central venous line port under his right collarbone. The nonstop flopping in his chest distressed him. He caught a quick glimpse of the visitor pushing down the plunger. An instant later, he felt his muscles twitching. All memories rapidly faded except for fleeting images of those good times that he once enjoyed with Beth. Within seconds, he closed his eyes for the last time. A brew of excessive amounts of his chemo concoction spiced with lethal doses of potassium chloride had swiftly worked its murderous magic.



Before reaching the hallway, the visitor discreetly pocketed the facial masquerade and cap and nonchalantly walked out of the front door of Mercy Hospital, knowing that no one would even bother to check what just happened in Room 202. One fact was clear. Sam Murphy would not be the last to fall prey to the leaders of The Health Club. The Harley sped away from the hospital that night, leaving no one the wiser.

Chapter One

*“Some men see things as they are, and ask why?
I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?”*
—George Bernard Shaw, as paraphrased
by Robert F. Kennedy

Damn the President. A sea of faces surrounded Dr. Jonathan Rogers as he shuffled his way down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the hotel, silently cursing. Then one familiar face popped out. He steered toward the redheaded woman, trying to shake off his foul mood. He remembered her name—Haley—and smiled. With each plodding step in her direction, his smile broadened. His early morning conversation with her while they soaked in the steamy waters of the Marriott Hotel hot tub came to mind. But then he thought of Kim, and felt a pang of guilt. He wanted to believe that Haley was just a passing fancy. His marriage was on the ropes, but he somehow believed they could work through their problems. At least Rogers hoped they could. Still, he wondered what it would be like to be with someone so young and exciting.

The young woman’s stride, confident and bold in her pale blue coat, cut easily through the noontime bustle. No more than ten feet away, Roger’s gaze latched onto her sensuous light green eyes, now strangely frozen in place, her silky-smooth face as tempting as it was earlier that morning.

Abruptly, Haley stopped on the snow-covered sidewalk, just opposite the Ellipse. She flipped open her cell and appeared to speak forcefully. He wondered what to say as he walked closer to her and settled on asking her to join him for a drink. That’s harmless, he reasoned. And after his meeting with the President, he sure could use one. Before he could greet her, however, she rushed toward the curb. A DC taxi screeched to a halt. She spun around to face Rogers with a glint in her almond-sized eyes

before she climbed into the front seat of the taxi. Rogers tracked the cab down the avenue until it disappeared from sight.

Standing still on the busy avenue, Rogers was suddenly shoved from behind, and he fell forward onto the icy sidewalk. He looked up at a couple of teenage boys roughhousing among the fast-moving lunchtime crowd. Rogers struggled to regain his footing, and winced as he looks down at his bloodied hands and the torn kneecap silk of his Armani suit. He limped over to the inside of the sidewalk, away from the crowd, and pulled out his cell phone.

A woman's voice answered, "Jonathan? How did it go?"

"It's over," he said.

"What's over?"

"I should have listened," he said as if she hadn't spoken. "You told me that it would end this way."

"No, I said I didn't think you would make the cut. You just don't fit the mold."

"But, I have all the right credentials. I'm better prepared for this job than anyone else in America."

"Please, we went through this before. So, what happened during your interview?"

"Not what I expected from the most powerful man on earth."

"Jonathan, get to the point!"

He paused for a few moments, grimacing. "Anyway, I just fell pretty hard on the ice."

"Are you hurt?"

Rogers glowered back at the White House. "No, those people can't hurt me."

"I'm talking about your fall on the ice. Stay put. I'll be there in a minute to help you. I'm walking through the hotel lobby."

He shook his head. "Kim, you know what I have always believed? When your dreams die, you die."

"At least now, you'll have more time to spend with me. We'll celebrate tonight."

"I'm in no mood. Anyway, it's only been a few months. Don't think I'm ready."

"Then why did you ask me to come here with you?"

“How about giving me some moral support for starters? You know that my interview with the President was important to me.”

“You could have brought the dog if all you wanted was a friend.”

He blurts out, “I can’t believe you said that!”

“What do you want me to say!”

“Never mind . . . I don’t know. I guess I just wonder what the hell has happened to our generation. We were supposed to change the world. Doesn’t anyone care anymore about doing what’s right?”

“Hey, I just know one thing.” Kim’s voice was calm now, gentle.

“And that would be?”

“What’s right is for us to put our problems aside and focus on connecting again with one another. Let’s have some fun for a change. Before we left Michigan, I thought you said you were ready. That *we* were ready.”

“I was hoping to work things out, but you just don’t seem to understand me anymore.”

“You’re obsessed with public health. But it has to be your way. Reality is not black and white, Jonathan.”

“I know that. But the gray area of compromising basic principles won’t give us universal health care.”

“The blurring of the truth . . . the gray zone . . . is where politics thrives. Maybe you should stop thinking about becoming Surgeon General. Maybe it’s not meant to be.”

“I’m not going to forget it, or give up. The country needs decisive leadership, not backroom political deals between the special-interest groups.”

“Then if you really want the damn job, you’ll just have to follow the President’s lead like everyone else. That’s the way it works down here.”

“I’m not his puppet. The Supreme Court crowned him, not the people.”

“Listen to me. You’re not in command. If you can’t let go of your dream, then just follow the President’s lead.”

“You’re fading. I think I’m losing . . .”

“. . . follow the President’s lead.”

Rogers closed his eyes, feeling completely alone. He heard a couple of whizzing sounds zip by his right ear just as an intense stabbing pain struck him in his upper chest, followed by a sensation of damp warmth. He looked down and saw a crimson-colored spot of blood rapidly spreading across his starched white shirt. He stumbled, catching a fleeting glimpse of a young man, a jogger, dressed in sweats and sneakers. The jogger was hobbling toward a nearby stone ledge. Blood stained his pant leg.

Rogers wiped away beads of sweat from his forehead. Unable to focus, his mind whirled as though he had just climbed aboard a merry-go-round. Fuzzy-looking images were slipping away with each spin. Kim’s face flashed before him. Then their daughter, Ashley. He frantically reached out to them for help, touching nothing, and fell to his knees. The avenue grew darker while he sucked each breath, fighting the mounting suffocation. His hands clawed the frozen sidewalk to steady himself against the brisk winds until he collapsed, crashing face down onto the slick pavement.

Chapter Two

Less than an hour earlier, Rogers felt as though he was floating on a magic carpet ride as he was being escorted down the red-carpeted, ornate hallway by a presidential aide. The elegant trappings of the Oval Office seemed to mesmerize him. The eastern sun, flowing through the double-hung windows, appeared to cast an ever-widening halo around the large frame of the President. As soon as his hands were enveloped in the greeting, President Will Jordan's iron-like grip caused Rogers to clench his jaw tightly. The small bones in his hand felt as if they were in a vice. He was being reeled toward the commander in chief as he tried to hold his ground. But he was off balance and felt violated by the President's aggressive handshake and piercing crystal-clear blue eyes.

"Dr. Rogers, welcome to the People's House. Your boss, Governor Peabody, assures me that you're just about the most effective Commissioner of Health in the country. He believes that your widespread popularity could help my administration if I choose you as my next Surgeon General."

"Mr. President, it's my honor and privilege to be considered," Rogers said a bit stiffly. "Providing health-care policy analysis to you and the Secretary of Health has been my dream for quite some time."

The President released his hand and grinned. "What I need are team players. But there is only one captain. I hope you know what I mean."

Rogers bit his lip, trying to ignore the President's insinuation. He remained silent.

The President's face hardened. His campaign grin vanished into a snarl. "Well, do you?"

Rogers chose his words carefully. "Yes, Mr. President. I promise you that I'll work for what's best for America."

Jordan chuckled. "That's a nice sound bite, Doc."

The commissioner replied softly, "It's the truth, sir." He wiped his moist hands on the back of his trousers.

"Well, Doc, your day of reckoning is about to begin."

"I hope to convince you that I can make things happen."

"Really?" the President replied under his breath while strolling over to his massive oak desk. He leaned over, pushing a gold button under the side ledge, just below his personal notepad, which teetered over the edge.

Dr. Rogers walked toward the couch and wondered whether the President's secret hobby was squeezing rubber balls. His hand still ached from the handshake. He remained standing until Jordan took his seat in a high-backed red-leather chair. The President gestured toward the couch. Rogers felt the knots in his neck muscles tightening with each tick of the Ben Franklin wall clock. While rubbing away the tension, he noticed Jordan picking up a vinyl-covered manila folder from the coffee table.

"Give me a moment to scan the executive summary in your file."

"Of course, Mr. President." He forced a weak smile and scanned the Oval Office, resting his eyes on the two flags behind the presidential desk.

After thumbing through a few pages, Jordan glanced up and furrowed his eyebrows. He said, "By the way, you better be ready for Ms. London. She can be a real pit bull."

"May I ask, sir, who she is?"

Jordan cast his eyes back on the report, saying nothing. A moment later, the blue desk phone rang.

"Excuse me, Doc. I've been waiting for an important call. Probably my granddaughter. Stephie promised to let me know how she made out at her softball game."

Rogers leaned back and stretched, watching the President beam as soon as he picked up. But all the while, he could not blot out the thought of a pit bull named London waiting in the wings.

"Good job, Stephie. Talk soon. Love you." Jordan hung up the phone and puffed his chest. "She threw a shutout in her first varsity game. A chip off the old block."

“Mr. President, I know how you feel. Our daughter Ashley just placed in the top ten in her first 10k race. We’re so proud.”

“We checked you out, Dr. Rogers. You’re a family man. Your loyalty will serve you in good stead should I appoint you as my Surgeon General.”

The door creaked slightly and Rogers looked up. An attendant stood in the doorway carrying a gold-plated tray bearing three coffee mugs and several enormous chocolate chip cookies. After being waved forward by the President, the young man set down the tray on the coffee table and left.

“Doctor, please,” Jordan offered.

“Thank you, sir.”

He chose one of the five-inch cookies and glanced up just as a smartly dressed middle-aged woman walked briskly through the open doorway. Her heels echoed off the marble floor. Jordan tossed the manila folder onto the coffee table, almost capsizing a pitcher of cream. Rogers pushed himself up from the sofa to follow. The President opened his arms toward the stern-faced new arrival.

“Doc, I’ve asked my Chief of Staff to join us. Tracey London, I’d like you to meet Dr. Jonathan Rogers, our Michigan Commissioner of Health.”

Rogers extended his hand toward her but London took a step away from him, ignoring the invitation.

“Good morning Commissioner,” she said rigidly as she walked quickly to the sofa. She sat at the end closest to the President’s chair.

Rogers’s hand drifted lower. “Good morning, Ms. London.”

“Doc, I’ve been closely following your career as Commissioner,” the President said, as he seated himself on what Rogers came to think of as his throne.

The President cleared his throat several times. Rogers nibbled on the cookie he was holding and locked his gaze on Jordan.

“I was very impressed with your support of the Michigan Physician Guideline Bill. Peabody informed me of your initial concerns before he convinced you. I hope your arm doesn’t still hurt. The Governor can be a little pushy.”

“I must admit that he made a compelling case that it was the right legislation for the people.” Rogers jokingly rubbed his shoulder. “A short course of physical therapy helped as well.”

Jordan slapped his thigh. “Good move on your part.”

Rogers felt London repeatedly shifting her weight across the leather cushions. As the last ripple tilted his side of the couch, he turned toward her. Her mouth opened slightly and he noticed a green mint lozenge floating on her tongue.

She asked, “If you’re appointed Surgeon General, would you completely align yourself with other governmental officials and all of our important constituency groups?”

“Ms. London, I’m a physician leader. I usually seek win-win solutions to pursue what is right.”

“Doc, who defines what is right?” Jordan asked.

Rogers noted the lines on the President’s forehead deepening. He hesitated a moment or two before replying. “I trust my own judgment as a physician.”

Jordan snapped, “Not in this arena.” He sprang to his feet and planted himself less than a foot away from Rogers’s black wingtips. The doctor slouched back on the couch, trying to reduce the angle of his upward gaze to meet Jordan’s growing scowl.

“I’ll be direct,” the President said. “Peabody recommended you based on your potential to work well with most of our key stakeholders. However, he promised me that you would correct your one irritating flaw.”

“I’m not sure what you mean?”

Jordan growled, “You did get Peabody’s message this morning, yes?”

Rogers nodded and glanced over at London. She was shaking her head in agreement with her boss. Turning back to his host, the Commissioner thought about the Governor’s warning, which he had previously dismissed.

“Let’s just say that I’m deeply concerned by your troublesome views on the pharmaceutical industry. You now have a chance to show us you can be flexible.”

London coughed several times. Rogers noticed her yellow-stained fingers and the magenta-colored blush that seemed

to be flowing down her chest. He turned back toward President Jordan.

“Sir?”

The President asked, “Do you believe that drugs should be fast-tracked through the FDA after they have been properly researched?”

“Not unless the data is compelling. There have been disasters with that approach, so I would say that it depends.”

The President blinked several times. Interlocking his fingers into a semblance of a crown, he held them at chest level.

“American drug companies have poured their well-deserved earnings into devising better medicines to improve health. They are the envy of the world. We need to help them. Don’t you agree?”

“Sir, I can work with anyone to achieve what’s best for our country.”

Jordan circled the far end of the couch. He lowered his voice almost to a whisper. “You didn’t answer my question.”

From the corner of his eye, Rogers saw Jordan lurking behind him, motioning like he was chopping wood with a handheld ax. He jerked his head around but only saw that the President had already dropped his hands, and was hustling back to his seat.

“Ms. London has received intelligence from those who know you best. I’ve been told that you want the pharmaceutical companies to produce more influenza vaccines. As you know, several of them have decided to opt out of that business citing low marginal profits.”

“Mr. President, I support every American having appropriate access to vaccines in a timely manner. It’s a matter of saving lives.”

Jordan responded, “The majority of those lives have voted for me. They are my people. Do you understand that?”

“Of course, basic health care is a right for everyone.”

Rogers spotted the Chief of Staff raising her hand. He twisted to face her.

“President Jordan and I want to know if you would pressure the pharmaceutical companies to provide free prescription

medications and vaccines to those who can't afford to pay.”

As she spoke, Rogers could no longer see the mint lozenge floating on top of her green-coated tongue. He rubbed the knots in his neck and glanced over at Jordan.

“It would be the right thing to do.”

The President covered his eyes with his right hand. A long silence ensued. Rogers believed he had flunked the most heavily weighted question of the interview. The sunbeams showered the room with a yellow haze that contrasted with the dark gloom that deepened on Jordan's face.

“Where would you get the money to pay for your scheme?”

Rogers pointed toward the windows behind the President's desk. “Out there people are suffering. Every drug company needs to do more to help all Americans achieve better health. It can't be just about making profits.”

“Sounds like you're planning on stirring up a lot of trouble for us,” Ms. London commented.

“That's not my intention,” he replied, glaring at her.

Her eyes took on an opaque glaze. She said, “Quite frankly, what you're saying will not reflect well on the Jordan administration.”

Rogers centered his sight back on the President. “The people will always respect those who are serving their interests.”

Jordan exploded. “Doc, I'll decide what's right for our country. Those people elected me, not you.”

Rogers pictured Peabody cringing back in Michigan. His boss would be disappointed. The Commissioner noticed a subtle quivering around the President's pursed lips. Jordan tapped his right foot as his eyes flickered toward the Chief of Staff.

Rogers took a deep breath. Exhaling slowly, he plunged ahead. “Mr. President, I believe—”

Jordan held up his right hand in front of his face. “Look, I appreciate your idealism, but the federal government isn't your personal play toy. If I appoint you Surgeon General, would you respect my views?”

Measuring his reply, he answered in a slow cadence. “In most cases, I'm sure that we would be in agreement. If we could not agree on a major policy issue, I would resign.”

The President pounded his right fist into his opposite palm. “So I would be risking my legacy on your willingness to go along? That’s not the way things work around here. Do you understand why I need your complete loyalty?”

Rogers lowered his head, staring at the presidential emblem on the blue and red carpet beneath his feet. He lifted his chin and quietly met Jordan’s gaze.

“Commissioner, I think I heard a ‘no.’”

“Sir, you must trust me.”

“It’s actually the other way around. I have the power. It is you, my good doctor; yes, it is you who must trust me.”

Rogers rolled back his shoulders. He felt his temples pounding; his throat parched.

He muttered, “I see.”

London stood and faced Rogers. “Let’s change the subject. I understand that you’ll be the keynote speaker at the upcoming National Health Commissioners Forum here in DC. What’s on your agenda?”

“You know about the Forum?”

Her eyes blazed brightly. “It’s my job to know what’s going on. I’m here to protect the President from being blindsided.”

Rogers set his jaw firmly. “As the keynote speaker, I hope to provide leadership to my fellow Commissioners from the other states. I believe that there is a critical need for physician leaders to band together.”

The Chief of Staff smirked. “So . . . if you’re successful, we would be forced to deal with fifty Commissioners of Health blasting the drug companies. Now, we have to contend with just you.”

“Perhaps not everyone will agree with me.”

The President rocked back and forth several times and scratched his ruddy cheeks. “I’m confused. Peabody told me just this morning that you considered the Surgeon General position to be your dream job. Was he mistaken?”

“Becoming Surgeon General is my life’s dream, yes.”

“Ah, I recall the dreams of my youth. Seems so long ago.”

“I hope that you’ll give me a chance.”

London quietly replied, “We just did.” She sat down on the couch and said no more.

Rogers focused on Jordan while avoiding the Chief of Staff’s angry stare.

“So, Dr. Rogers, what are your immediate plans?” the President asked, almost pleasantly.

The Commissioner took a deep breath. “I plan on calling a dozen of my fellow Commissioners of Health. It is my intent to develop a national coalition to lobby for better access to essential drugs and vaccines.”

Rogers felt the cushions moving from the Chief of Staff’s fidgeting. She asked, “Would you reconsider your plan and not organize all of the State Commissioners of Health? If you move forward, it would be a nightmare for me . . .for us . . . to deal with.”

“I’m sorry, but I believe in what I’m doing.”

“Sounds like you are about to lead a one-man crusade against the drug companies.”

Rogers met her gaze and tried hard not to flinch. London stood abruptly and said curtly, “Well, we all need to do what we have to do.”

The men followed suit, both rising to their feet. Jordan placed his hand on Rogers’s left shoulder and the doctor felt the heavy pressure. “By the way, are you here by yourself in DC?”

“I’ll be joining my wife in a few minutes. We’re heading back to Michigan tomorrow after dinner and the theater tonight.”

“What show are you seeing?”

Rogers could not remember. His mind was spinning. He felt the blush coming and could only shrug his shoulders.

“Please convey my best to Mrs. Rogers. Also, say hello to my good friend Bill Peabody. Thank you again for coming in today.”

The inside door flung open. There was the President’s secretary, presenting Rogers’s London Fog overcoat with outstretched arms. Rogers looked back at Jordan, who by now was already bounding away toward his oak desk with his Chief of Staff in close tow.

The Commissioner spoke an uncomfortable farewell. “Thank you, Mr. President.”

The secretary motioned for Rogers to follow him. Hastily ushered to the White House side door, he took a step outside and shivered in the frosty breeze. He could see Pennsylvania Avenue in the distance. From behind a white stone column, a Secret Service guard appeared. The Commissioner walked silently alongside the uniformed guard while being guided out of the twenty-acre complex.

Reaching the East Executive Avenue gatehouse, Rogers stared back at the temple of democracy. He pictured White House power brokers plotting to torpedo any chance of him becoming Surgeon General. He curled his fingers into a tight fist. His dream had flipped into a nightmare in less than twenty minutes. *Damn the President. Damn the President!*