

The Last Campaign

1

Virgil Turner clamped the small pillow between his head and shoulder and closed his eyes. Couple of bourbons, he could usually doze through the roughest air, an acquired skill after a million miles. But not tonight.

Finally he sat up, snapped on the reading light, and took out the thin leather case that held a half-dozen three-by-five cards. It had been a gift from a grateful United States Senator. Etched into the smooth calfskin was a simple *A*, for *Assassin*. Sometimes he hated the *A*; sometimes he loved it.

The plane hit rough air, dropped sharply, shuddered, leveled out. A wild whoop from tourist class. A few hands tightening on the armrests. Virgil Turner removed his new bifocals and put them away with the notecards containing his talking points for the fundraiser. Tonight his clever ad-libs would have to be clever ad-libs. He closed his eyes again and angled his long legs into the aisle.

He stirred and straightened when the plane touched down and the engines roared into reverse, churning the recent coating of snow into a white froth. There was snow everywhere; mounds of dark ice flanked the runway. He'd have been landing in Tallahassee if Todd had stayed in. His old pal Jack Todd had begged, *Don't take another client, Virge, I'm in it all the way this time, governor or bust, don't take another client,*

Virge. So, atypically, Virgil Turner allowed his heart to overrule his head and turned down several potential clients in favor of helping elect Jack Todd governor of Florida. That's what politics could do to you — sweep you in, scare you out. He could have talked Todd back in but didn't try. Candidate's decision. Now, instead of a sultry winter in the sun, Virgil had the steppes of Siberia and some other jasper who wanted to be governor. Name of the game and glad to be here. As the jetliner taxied to the gate, he tied a blue bandanna around his neck.

Carrying a black overcoat and a scuffed leather briefcase, Virgil strode down the jetway and into the terminal, weaving around little knots of people. The terminal reminded him of Birmingham. Or was it Norfolk? A young man trotted up beside him.

“Excuse me, Mr. Turner? Virgil Turner?”

“Guilty,” Virgil said, shaking hands with a trim six-footer in his mid-twenties wearing a gray pinstriped suit but no topcoat. Thick red-brown hair flecked with large drops of melted snow. Bright brown eyes, innocent and expectant. First campaign, thought Virgil. He could have been looking at himself, twenty stern years before.

“How you doin’?” Virgil said. “Happy New Year.”

“Great. Great. Happy New Year. Happy 1992! Miles Henry. It's an honor to meet you, Mr. Turner. That bandanna works great.”

Smiling, Virgil untied the bandanna with one hand and pocketed it. He shrugged into the overcoat and they proceeded along the concourse.

“Anybody show up tonight, Miles? This weather?”

“Full house, Mr. Turner. Few inches of snow couldn't stop 'em — they all want to meet the Assassin.”

“God love the little defectives.”

“These little defectives have money.”

“God love the little defectives with money, for they shall inherit the statehouse.”

“There’s a couple party crashers, too.”

“Spies?”

“One’s a reporter, the other is some nutcase who’s going to sue us.”

“Sue us? For what? We haven’t done anything yet.”

“Putting his picture in our brochure.”

Virgil Turner laughed and looked at Miles. “There’s a reporter at our fundraiser?”

Miles Henry nodded vigorously. “An unfriendly reporter.”

“Ain’t they all. Why’d we let him in? Or her?”

“Lyle says we have nothing to hide.”

They reached Baggage Claim, collected Virgil’s luggage, and went outside. It was very cold. The drifting snow had closed one lane of traffic on the Arrivals ramp. Miles Henry led the way to a black sedan with a *House of Representatives 1* plate which was idling at the curb. He gave a discreet wave to a policeman in a heavy parka who was swinging his arms against the cold and helped Virgil put the bags in the trunk.

“What’s in this one?” Miles said, hefting a squat leather case. “Bowling ball?”

“Rolodex,” Virgil said. Miles laughed and closed the trunk.

They got in the sedan and Miles reached for the black Audiovox phone that dominated the center console. He punched in a number. Virgil heard a female voice answer on the first ring.

“On the way,” Miles said.

“Hurry!” the voice said.

The policeman came over and stopped traffic. Miles eased the sedan around an SUV with all its doors open and onto the roadway. Another wave to the cop.

“Man, I’m glad you’re finally here, Mister Turner — ”

“Virgil, please, Miles. No misters in politics.”

Miles chuckled. “Okay. Virgil. I’m glad you’re finally here because we don’t exactly know what the hell we’re doing. Like tonight, we’ve got two gate-crashers and nobody agrees on how to handle it. As usual.”

“Surely, Miles, you don’t have a big grabass campaign with everybody in charge and nobody in charge and the candidate running loose among the citizenry.”

“Yes! Exactly! And everybody fighting all the time. So we’re pretty normal?”

“Perfectly normal, Miles. I’m warm enough if you are.”

Miles turned down the heater and cracked a window.

“They’re even fighting about you. Still.”

Virgil felt something inside, a little flare in the bloodstream. A familiar feeling, not entirely uncomfortable. Barely off the plane and the palace intrigue bubbling away. Name of the game.

“It came down to you and two other dudes. You won on the fourth ballot.”

“The Piper for Governor Campaign extends you a hearty welcome — on the fourth ballot. Should I demand a recount?”

“You want to know the other two?”

“Lyle told me.”

Miles busied himself with the mirrors. Patches of ice shimmered like quicksilver in the headlights. He negotiated the trouble spots easily.

“How many campaigns you been in, Virgil?”

“Forty-four.”

“Forty-four! All of us put together, maybe a dozen, and nobody was the manager.”

“I managed some, consulted to the others. Some of ’em managed me.”

“How many . . .”

“Winners? Thirty-two.”

“Thirty-two. That’s good, that’s good.”

“Well, it’s seventy-two point seventy-two percent. Approximately.”

“Seventy-two percent? All right! No wonder they call you the Assassin.” Glancing at Virgil. “Seventy-two’s good, isn’t it?”

“Not too bad. Winning is the name of the game, but it’s a funny game sometimes — best campaign I ever saw lost.”

Virgil waited for the question that always came. He had got a hook in early. After twenty years he could be cynical about his inventory of hooks, the wisdom or flotsam of a life on the front lines. *Best campaign I ever saw lost . . . It’s not your enemies who beat you, it’s your friends . . . In politics it ain’t the words, it’s the music.* Once they had been insights; revelations; pure. Only when you knew them could they become hooks. Only when you had lived them and knew they were true. Not always true, it took a professional to know. The amateurs could memorize this stuff all day, only the pros knew what was true and when. So here was the old pro, wasting a hook on a driver.

“Which campaign was it, Virgil? The best one you ever saw?”

“Long story, Miles, requires a copious amount of sour-mash whiskey, tell it right.”

They were passing through an area of apartment buildings and occasional storefronts. Several automobiles had not been dug out and were encased in ice. The snowplows had piled more on.

“How about that?” Miles said, pointing to a billboard on the side of a building proclaiming *Wallace Gage – A Simple Man For Governor* in red letters. There was a giant black-and-white photo, three-quarter profile, of jowls and bushy eyebrows and hard eyes. No dreamer, this Wallace Gage, thought Virgil. The face of a practical man.

“You can’t drive ten miles without seeing one of those,” Miles said. “They went up before Christmas.”

“A simple man who just happens to be a millionaire.”

“What do you think?” Miles asked as he made a turn. “Problem?”

“No.”

After a moment, Virgil added: “The billboards aren’t a problem. The millionaire part — that could be a problem.”

“Gage ran once before. Spent two million and finished last.”

“Might’ve learned something,” Virgil said. “How about Fleming — I assume he’s still in.”

“He says he is. He’s a millionaire, too, you know. A lefty environmentalist with bucks.”

Virgil laughed. “Millionaire to left of us, millionaire to right of us. Let’s hope the center’s wide enough.”

“Is the center usually wide enough?”

“May have to throw a few elbows.” Virgil folded his hands together. “So we’ve got to beat two millionaires just for the chance to face Millionaire Number Three, who already occupies the job.”

“Governor McBride’s not really a millionaire. Personally.”

“They’re always the richest.”

Virgil was feeling the edge now, the little gnaw that always came before an opening performance. The juices beginning to run. Combat had always been his narcotic: football, high-stakes golf, five-card draw, and the most addictive of all, the first Tuesday after the first Monday, the only game with no second chance. War without bloodshed, someone had called it, and you couldn’t always be sure about the bloodshed. Hardly a life for a man past forty and here he was three years over the hill. He loved it.

They were in an affluent residential area. Menacing icicles hung like sabers in the fog. Damocles country, Virgil mused, with sharper swords ahead. Four ballots.