



THE RECONSTRUCTIONISTS

BIFF PRICE

CHAPTER 1

President Michael Stonebreaker sat behind the Resolute desk and looked out the East Door toward the Rose Garden. He was lonely. Joan, his First Lady, was away in Dallas speaking at an NEA convention. Her duties required far more of her time than he liked, but he appreciated that she took her role seriously and did her best to honor most requests for personal appearances. Two years ago, she'd worried whether the future held any possibility of meaningful work for her at all.

Vice President Eric Dryden was also away, visiting India on a mission to review a trade agreement. Michael felt Eric's absence, even as he glanced at a photo from last year's visit to the Grand Canyon.

Henry, his brother and best friend, was back home in Clear Haven, Pennsylvania, visiting their mother. Although he served Michael willingly as his chief confidant, head speech writer, and frequent counselor, Henry would have left Washington, DC behind in a heartbeat to return to his first love: fixing heavy equipment for the strip mines that surrounded their home town.

Michael sighed, already tired. His weekly six-day schedule was crammed with commitments from early morning to late evening. His regimen allowed for ninety minutes in the Workout Room three

days a week. He rose at 5:30 a.m. and paced off two miles by 6:00 a.m. five days a week. They could take a man out of West Point, but it's hard to take West Point out of a man. He was one of the most disciplined men to ever serve in the office, but even with his busy schedule there were moments when the loneliness of leading the most powerful nation on earth crept in.

His first two years in office had been tumultuous. The media firestorm had not abated in intensity with the passage of time. The New York Times, Washington Post, and other media outlets were on the verge of apoplexy demanding to know what had happened to the previous administration, Congress, numerous college faculty members, Hollywood Liberals, and other Progressive elites. Their demands fell on deaf ears.

The Movement, the clandestine organization responsible for thwarting the Progressive takeover of the United States and installing Michael as president remained hidden in an off-the-grid city beneath the central Pennsylvania hills. Its members had no desire to reveal The Movement's existence to the public, in case the need to take direct action arose again.

Now, the federal government was being deconstructed brick-by-brick. Michael and the Congress were systematically dismantling the monster; it had to die in order to be reborn. Otherwise, it would have destroyed the Union in short order. The insane Progressive agenda had come to an end. Under their watch, government had grown to such a monstrous size that it would take years to reconstruct it.

No one was being thrown under the bus, however; instead huge groups of people were being retrained for a new place in commerce. Manufacturing was being stimulated in America. Thousands upon thousands of regulations were being discarded, corporate America was awakening to a world where genius and innovation were rewarded, not penalized, and the American worker was celebrating in many places again. Cities and towns that had been destroyed by over-regulation, urban ghettos, and hopelessness were seeing the promise of revitalization through private sector jobs. The days of despair and cynicism were ending.

The Department of Education was gone. A balanced budget amendment had been passed. The massive Progressive healthcare

bill was no more. A restructuring of Medicare and Medicaid was in process, and when it was finished, fraud, as they knew it, would be next to impossible. Social Security was placed in a secure lock box. The money paid in by hard-working Americans would never again be placed in the general fund to be raided at will.

No one doubted that returning to fiscal sanity was going to take a long time. Nevertheless, Michael was confident that as responsibilities and revenue were returned to the states and the massive entitlements were restructured an improved economy would grow. As in times past, under those conditions American ingenuity and entrepreneurship would triumph.

The Movement's plan to revitalize the American economy was moving forward. Many government workers were being retrained for private sector jobs. With a massive Manhattan Project approach designed by The Movement over sixty years, the new leadership was overhauling every level of society simultaneously. Nothing would be allowed to stop The Movement's plan. It might require a decade or more to restore America to common sense, but the work was well underway.

Two months into the new administration, the governors of all fifty states gathered in Washington for a four-day conference. Liberals, moderates, and conservatives were confronted with the new reality, and when they understood that they would have more revenue and power in the future, as well as an exponentially increased responsibility to their citizens, they signed on to participate. There were a handful of Progressives among them, but The Movement had identified them years before. They had been confronted in a private meeting with the president, and they knew that if they wished to remain in power, they had to be helpful. Politicians are, if nothing else, well-versed in expediency.

The amazing thing about The Movement was that it had such profound thinkers among its members. They understood the cost of freedom, its fragility, its faults as well as its virtues, and what it took to maintain it. Before they had acted to remove the Progressive nightmare in America, they had watched the evil elitist plan to take over the nation grow insidiously within the halls of Congress for decade after decade. It had been like placing a frog in a pot of comfortable water on a stove, and then turning up the heat one degree

each year until there was no escape.

Following Michael's occupancy of the White House, the story released to mainstream media focused on the Progressive manifesto of madman Pierce Armstrong and his plan to destroy the United States from within, including the horrific attack he'd planned for Disney World. Thanks to The Movement, the attempt was marked indelibly in the collective mind of the country as something that should never be repeated.

Michael decided to try to wind down with some reading before dinner. He made the relatively short trip from the West Wing to the White House residence. He never ceased to be fascinated by the history contained within the walls of the White House.

As had many of the others, the Treaty Room served many functions over the years, including that of cabinet meeting room, waiting room, first ladies' work room, and even as a bridge parlor under Dwight Eisenhower. The treaty ending the Spanish-American War had been signed here in 1898 under President McKinley, and the room was later named to commemorate that event by President Kennedy. For the most part the room had served as the president's private study, and Michael and Joan decided to use it that way.

Michael sat down in his easy chair and gazed for a moment at the view of the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial in the distance. The weight of occupying the office of president of the United States seemed to settle on him like the years of history embodied in this house.

He picked up a copy of a novel by a new author. It was a story about a magical world where four children embarked on thrilling adventures and met fantastic characters. It was a fascinating book that reminded him slightly of C.S. Lewis's tales of Narnia, except that the images in this book were crafted as a striking metaphor for the afterlife. Normally he had little time for this kind of reading, but Joan had gone to the trouble of presenting him with an autographed copy for Christmas, so he'd decided to read it.

The soft ding of a muted bell sounded and a voice spoke into the room. "Good evening, sir. Will the president be having dinner in the study this evening?"

"Yes," Michael said, scratching his chin. "Let's make it salad, Joan's meatloaf, green beans, and cookies and ice cream for dessert."

“Very good, sir,” came the reply.

When dinner arrived, Michael ate in silence. He had no desire to hear the news of the day. After dinner, he turned on the television for a half hour, but there was nothing that appealed to him.

He briefly thought about watching a movie, but he decided that an early bedtime would be a good thing. He was tired. It was probably because Joan wasn't at home. He dialed her cell number.

“Hey, First Lady, how was your day?” Michael asked.

“They adored me, but they're not too sure about you,” Joan teased.

“That's to be expected,” Michael said. “Did you explain to them that I adored you first?” He smiled and pressed the phone closer to his ear. He missed his wife, and just hearing her voice made him glad she'd be home tomorrow.

“Your Majesty, I'm so humbled by the attention,” Joan said, and laughed.

“I miss you. I'm hitting the hay early. It's boring here without you.”

“I'll be home before noon tomorrow,” Joan said.

“In time for church?” Michael asked. He hoped they'd be able to go together.

“More than likely,” Joan said. “I don't think there will be too much traffic on a Sunday morning heading into town.”

“That's wonderful, honey.” Michael sighed. “I'll be glad to have you home.”

“I'll be glad to be home,” Joan said. “The conference has been great, but Dallas is a long way from DC and you.”

“I agree,” Michael said. They spent a few moments catching up on events from the past few days before the conversation drew to a close.

“I'll see you in the morning, my love,” Joan said.

“I'm looking forward to it,” Michael said. He blew a kiss into the phone and they hung up.

Michael got ready for bed. He opened the novel and began reading. The children in the story climbed an old tree and were transported into an enchanted world where they met a wise old owl. It reminded him of when he and his brother Henry would go on imaginary journeys through the woods behind their house when they

were kids. He grew sleepy reminiscing on those simple days.

After placing the book on the nightstand he turned out the light and settled into the big empty bed. One of the unfortunate things about being president was that he now spent more time away from his wife than he had in over twenty years of marriage.

Yet, after such an exhausting day, he fell asleep in moments. It was the best sleep he'd had in months. That was a good thing, because all hell was about to break loose.