

Echo House

Ward Just

A Peter Davison Book

A MARINER BOOK
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*To Sarah
and to Jennifer, Julie, and Ian*

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Prologue: Echo House

THE STONE MANSION called Echo House had been owned by the Behl family since 1916, the last year of the first Wilson administration, a purchase made at the insistence of Constance Behl, who saw for herself a brilliant future in the nation's capital. She saw beyond the dull Southern village that it was to the thrilling metropolis that it would become. With the triumphant entry of the United States into the European war, the wider world was gloriously at hand and her husband poised to embrace it. Owing to the death of one member and the defeat of another, Senator Adolph Behl was suddenly ranking member of his committee and already mentioned here and there as a likely candidate for the national ticket, some day, some way, if the cards fell fairly. Constance craved a particular mansion on Lafayette Square, but that was unavailable, so she settled for Echo House.

Towering high on the slope overlooking Rock Creek Park to the north and the federal triangle to the southeast, Echo House was the oldest of the great houses in that part of Washington. Everyone agreed that it was ideal for the up-and-coming Behls and something of a conversation piece due to its ingenious interior design. The architect was a follower of Benjamin Latrobe and the landscapist an associate of the incomparable Olmsted. The house was situated on a full two acres of land, well away from the vulgar hustle of the downtown hotels and about as far from Capitol Hill as geography allowed. Constance liked to say that politicians were like cats: they preferred to do their business in one place and sleep in another. Echo House was grand without being ostentatious, the sort of spacious, serious mansion that could accommodate a formal ball, an afternoon tea, or a masculine evening of cards, whiskey, and political conversation. In due course it would serve very well as a place where her son, Axel, could gather with his friends.

Moreover, the house had a history. One of the many inconclusive meetings between President Lincoln and General McClellan had been held in the library (the armchair in which the Great Emancipator was believed to have sat was roped off, a tiny card announcing its significance), and later the billiards room became a clandestine after-hours haunt of President Cleveland, on those evenings when he was weary of statecraft. At that time the house was owned by an attractive widow, famous for her peach sorbet and lively conversation. Senator Behl bought the house from the widow's dissolute grandson, on the eve of the young man's departure for the battlefields of France, paying full price despite its wretched condition. For the senator this was a matter of honor, and his wife was indifferent to price. In a stroke Constance had reached base camp of the summit of her ambition, which was to assemble Washington's greatest salon, the rooms where the capital's mightiest figures would meet and the place where careers would be made and unmade; and from which her husband would make his final ascent and her son prepare his own. Echo House reminded Constance of the country houses maintained by the Anglo-Irish gentry in her native Galway, except that it was much bigger.

The name derived from the repetition of rooms on the first floor, each room perfectly square but diminishing in size so that the effect was of a set of Chinese boxes clustered like the squares of a chessboard. The arrangement was imaginative but impractical, function following form almost to the vanishing point—living room, foyer, dining room, garden room, morning room, library, study, powder room. Constance had directed that each room be furnished in a different period, but in the event France of the megalomaniacal Second Empire seemed to predominate, *its* ambitions as lofty as Napoleon III. Many of these rooms remained unchanged into the nineteen-nineties, giving Echo House the atmosphere of a museum (by that time Lincoln's chair had gone to the Smithsonian Institution, where it had a corner of its own and a plaque describing its provenance, along with the usual congratulations: *A donation of Mr. Axel Behl in memory of Constance Barkin Behl and Senator Adolph Behl.*

Of course the kitchen was located in the basement; dumbwaiters linked it to the dining room. There were bedroom suites and another library on the second floor, more bedrooms and a gallery on the third floor, and the billiards room and Observatory on the fourth. The oval Observatory with its vast domed ceiling was one of the most remarked-upon rooms in the District of Columbia, its circumference identical with the President's office in the White House. There was a powerful telescope in the Observatory, but it was seldom used. Its precision seemed to diminish the subject. The view with the naked eye was breathtaking, and as charming and suggestive as any of Monet's or Pissarro's cityscapes. At dusk Washington seemed to float above the earth, mauve in the blurred and fleeting light, image chasing image as in an infinity of mirrors, and finally returned to the spectator himself, flattered at the sight of such seductive grandeur. This was Constance's view of things, sitting in the Observatory with her afternoon tea, corrected in the usual way. At night the sight was merely spectacular, inspiring in the manner of an imperial capital going about its imperial business, superbly confident, willful, giddy in its enthusiasm. L'Enfant's broad avenues

connected to a dozen circles containing reminders of the tempestuous past—slender generals on horseback, admirals caressing spyglasses, heavy iron cannon left and right, parks deftly placed, symmetry triumphant. And indeed the White House and the Capitol were located according to the arrangement of the Grand Trianon and the palace at Versailles, the Capitol dome the highest point on the horizon, the symbol of the primacy of the people. That was the bountiful place where the big cats prowled and pawed and did their business and then came home, exhausted but content. Ireland was so dark and silent and earth-bound, and here the land was liquid and afire, the great floating monuments brilliantly lit and wrapped by the sparkling ribbon of the Potomac. And beyond the river, invisible but audible, the beat of the nation itself, the rumble of a mighty army, turbines, combines, printing presses, roads and rails stretching to the outermost edges of the realm. And—how provident that the spoils always returned to the capital city, protector and defender of the nation's birthright, repository of the U.S. Constitution itself.

From her armchair in the Observatory it seemed to Constance that the whole sumptuous metropolis was arrayed on a platter, its delicacies there for the taking; and the big cats would bring them to you, too, if you asked them nicely, flattered them, and fed them a treat. At twilight the city's ambiance was grave, its mood somber, as the workaday world wound down and ended with the bang of a gavel. And by night it came magnificently alive, as majestic as a cathedral and as vivacious as an operetta, with ominous aspects of the jungle as well. From the Observatory at Echo House it was easy to forget that Washington was just another glum city of government, like Albany or Sacramento, legislators and lobbyists and bureaucrats and their clerks working and reworking the sodden language of government in order to distribute the spoils. Instead, it was fabulous—and more fabulous in its reach and aspiration and promise and desire than any of the great capitals of Europe.

Naturally in so febrile an environment there were disappointments, schemes delayed or denied, the odds stacked against, ambitions unrealized. The capital's numerous checks and balances were formidable, and no less formidable for their subtlety; often a certain languid modesty won the day. All the same, Constance Behl thought Echo House auspicious. History had been made there; history would continue to be made. Peach sorbet would yield to oysters and Champagne as Washington continued to grow and prosper, extending its reach beyond the known world. Constance thought of her capital as a city-state like Venice or Genoa, the genius of its diplomacy and the weight of its treasury guaranteeing something like a golden age. She saw the great boulevards as canals and the White House as a palace, in due course her husband in the Oval Office, her son waiting his turn. It may not happen in her lifetime. But it would happen.

You nudged fate; you put yourself in the hunt. So Constance insisted on setting her table personally, the flatware, the crystal, the china, the candelabra, the flowers, all situated just so on creamy Irish linen. She attended to this chore with the energy and enthusiasm of a general preparing the battlefield, and indeed that was how she saw herself and saw the after-hours life of the capital. She believed that tables were the

terrain of the common struggle. Life flourished on flat surfaces, desks, conference tables, lecterns, dinner tables, an indoor world; and as the general paid particular attention to his forward battalions, his artillery support and reserves and logistics, so Constance was concerned with the precedence of chairmen, which senator was across the table from which lobbyist, who was at her own elbows and who at Adolph's, the latter a delicate matter because he was not a lively partner, altogether too ponderous and self-absorbed, rarely contributing when she signaled general conversation. He did not roar as a lion should; not that anyone noticed in the prevailing din, and that upset Constance most of all. Of course the table glittered, but it had a businesslike quality as well, a commercial environment where practical conversation could flourish. She took special care with the placement of the candelabra, in that way encouraging cross-table discussion. Enfilade, the general would have called it. Constance thought the number twelve was just about right. That was the largest number that could be conveniently assembled within the range of one man's voice.

She believed it was cowardly to live in the capital city without participating in its intrigue, to be conspicuous at the table for the shuffle and the deal, to pay the ante whatever its sum, and to continue as long as there was a bet to be called or raised. A man was dealt a hand, and how he played it was a test of character; and so much depended on luck and the nerve to conceal an ace up your sleeve. You won or you lost but you stayed at the table, because the fabulous intrigue was there, and the intrigue would determine your own place in the volatile scheme of things. You lived in this manner for years, until one momentous night when all the chips were on the table, wagered on the turn of a single card—a vote in the Senate, a vote in the jury box, a vote at a national convention, a telephone call announcing that the White House was on the line. For a moment your world held its breath, your future poised on the cusp of the next rotation, and you were rewarded or punished. Yet this too had to be admitted, though Constance never did—such was the fundamental instability of Washington, and such was its fluidity, that there was always the suspicion of a more important game being played elsewhere, and the outcome of that game would have a mighty influence on your own. *Were you at the wrong table?*

Constance saw a passionate ballet of force and counterforce, a dance to music of opposing styles and tempi while the world watched and made its judgment. The world governed, and the world's judgment was decisive. In every family there's a moment seen as a turning point, the dancer dipping and weaving, moving center stage or into the wings, the music quickening or dying, the audience on its feet or on its hands, giving approval or withholding it. When things did not go well the reasons why were all too familiar; bad luck, bad timing, bad cards, bad judgment, false friendship, betrayal. No encore.

The unhappy event enters the world's memory and the family's as well, the facts becoming gray with age, misshapen as the legacy is passed from one generation to the

next, described often in the language of the failed romance. If only you had loved me as I loved you, if only you had courage, faith, fidelity, trust—well, then, the world would be a different world. The family would have been a different family—more prominent, more respected, richer, healthier, happier, wiser. The failed romance, the unfortunate investment, the neglected medical appointment—or Adolph Behl's obsessive pursuit of the nomination for vice president of the United States. He confided to Constance that he was not in the first cut but he was the tallest tree in the second cut; and the vice presidency was the honor he wanted and would have. When she sneered that politics had nothing in common with the timber industry, he interrupted. More than you think, he said.

You've settled for second best, she replied.

You've ruined my life, darling.

The night Senator Behl's name would be put in nomination, Constance arranged a party in the Observatory. There was a terrible storm that night, rain falling in sheets, battering the windows. Someone said that the Observatory seemed like the drenched fo'c'sle of a ship, shuddering with each gust of wind. They were listening to the convention on the radio, the signal erratic even with the special antenna the Navy provided. Many good friends from Washington and elsewhere in the East were present; and Sir Charles Rath had sailed over from England. Constance presided; and there were seven other women, wives, enough for two lively tables of bridge in the billiards room. Everyone was in high good humor, because they all knew how long their old friend had sought his prize; they were happy for him and for themselves, too. The rising tide raised all the yachts. A private railway car was waiting on a siding at Union Station to take them north as soon as definite word was received, though that was only a formality, because Senator Behl had the support of the nominee, that support to be announced before the balloting. Everything was arranged and all that remained was the telephone call from the Man himself. Champagne was cooling in silver buckets in the billiards room, where the women were playing cards. The butler, old John, had stationed himself next to the telephone. In the deep shadows near the mariner's telescope, so inconspicuous as to be barely visible, stood young Axel Behl, summoned from school for the occasion. Constance insisted upon it, reminding her husband that it was the boy's birthday.

The room was loud with conversation, the men making plans for the coming campaign and the fine administration to follow. David Longfellow and Chairman Tyner of the House Banking Committee debated the economy. Senator Bilbauer and Judge Justin Aswell of the Appeals Court did not like the shape of things in the farm belt. Former Secretary George Steppe and Congressman Curly Peralta were filling jobs, a seat on the Interstate Commerce Commission or the chairmanship of the American Battle Monuments Commission, general counsel of this board or that

agency, ambassadorships, the judiciary. George and Curly agreed that this President-to-be held his cards close to his vest, and that was a problem, because George Steppe wanted his son Georgie to be the U.S. Attorney in Boston, a post that vice president-to-be Adolph Behl could help secure—if he performed superbly in the campaign, and campaigning was not the senator's long suit. His own seat was so safe that he had never had to fight for it, and he was temperamentally unsuited to trench warfare in any case. Adolph Behl raised money and worked behind the scenes in the Senate and was at least as effective at one as at the other.

Slowly the rain began to end. Young Axel could see the misty lights of Washington far below. He put his eye to the telescope and listened to the exchange between the former secretary and the congressman, understanding little except that Mr. Steppe wanted something for Georgie and his father was supposed to help him get it when he was vice president. Axel turned to see his father deep in conversation with Chairman Tyner, the chairman talking and his father listening and nodding, every now and then glancing at the telephone. The radio was turned low, inaudible except for the scratch of static. From the billiards room Axel heard the women bidding, one club, one heart, one no trump, five spades, double, and then his mother's voice, Irish around the edges.

"Why don't they call, darling?"

His father grunted and did not reply.

"It's getting late. Don't you think it's late?"

"He'll call when it's time."

"I think it's late," Constance said, tapping her cards sharply on the table.

Constance resumed her monologue, a story her friends had heard many times, how as a little girl she had watched her father march off to war, Captain Barkin so handsome in his military kit, every daughter's dream. Jack Barkin was a man to be reckoned with. Of course the family name had been Anglicized to Barkin from de Barquin, Constance's grandfather having fled the Paris Commune in 1871, when aristocrats were shot on sight, arriving in Cork with the clothes on his back and little else except his good looks and his esprit de corps. God, he was a handsome man; all the de Barquins were tall and slender, *comme il faut*, irresistible to women, romantics by temperament. Her gallant father was off to the Transvaal to fight the Kaffirs. His charming letters home described each dangerous engagement, the troops massed on horseback—ah, he was a fine horseman—charging again and again, gloriously heedless of risk. Captain Barkin—Bar-canh, as Constance pronounced it—was put in for the Military Cross, but there was a tragic mix-up and before the mix-up was solved he was dead, killed by a lancer at Magersfontein, December 10, 1899. The family wept for days. The Queen herself sent condolences. Axel had the looks of the de Barquins, Constance concluded, most particularly the protruding upper lip, the de Barquin lip.

Chairman Tyner looked questioningly at Adolph, and Adolph said, "They weren't Kaffirs; they were Boers. He wasn't a captain; he was a conscript. And there was no mix-up, either, because there was no Military Cross. The rest of it, I'm not in a position to say."

"Aren't women extraordinary," the chairman said.

"Women live in a dream world," the senator replied bitterly.

When the call came at last everyone turned toward Adolph Behl. Curly Peralta began to clap and then all the men applauded, stopping abruptly when old John picked up the receiver and handed it to the senator. Adolph took it and stood at attention, listening, but it was evident at once that something was wrong, because after a few moments he began to cough uncontrollably and dropped the receiver. From the billiards room Constance asked what was wrong, darling. Someone stepped to the sideboard and poured Adolph a large whiskey, handing it to him carefully as if it were medicine. Old John retrieved the receiver and replaced it in its cradle.

Adolph stood motionless, the whiskey glass in his hand, the expression on his face unreadable. He looked like a classroom lecturer who had unaccountably lost his place and had forgotten what came next. He shifted the whiskey glass from his left hand to his right and in a sudden violent motion hurled it at the wall. Bits of crystal flew everywhere, but still he did not move. When his wife approached him he roughly pushed her away as if she were a tactless servant. *You bastard*, Constance snarled, loud enough for everyone to hear. Adolph's attention went quickly elsewhere, to his friends who were dumb with shock and dismay, except for Sir Charles Rath, who was too worldly to be shocked by anything and was rarely dismayed.

Humiliation gave way to rage, fury seeking to conceal insult as, many years later, the scar on the wall was concealed by a little Picasso sketch, a merry satyr in a loincloth scratching his cloven hoof. The senator was trembling, talking loudly to no one in particular, vowing revenge. His friends joined in because they too had been insulted. They all thought they were climbing to the top of the tree together, and when they discovered they weren't, they were furious. Adolph was still a United States senator and that counted for something, but his ambition was to be vice president. The nomination had been promised to him, and now the promise had been rudely withdrawn.

Curly Peralta managed, "What did he say exactly?"

Adolph mentioned a name, the young Midwestern governor, so well-liked in his own state and neighboring states, including Adolph's own state. He was the Man's choice, selected no doubt for his amiability and ignorance of national affairs; he would be a lap dog. Then Adolph murmured, "Alabama."

He meant that the Alabama delegation might revolt. He had good, close friends in that delegation, men he had known for years. He had attended their weddings, had

stood godfather to their children, had hunted on their plantations as they had come to Echo House for billiards and conversation. Because it stood first on the roll of states, any Alabama revolt could turn the convention. The radio static had cleared, and George Steppe turned up the volume so that they could all listen to the balloting.

Adolph stared at the radio as if it were human and capable of any surprise. But Alabama was solid; no one broke ranks, not a single delegate. The head of the delegation bawled the unanimous vote to cheers in the great hall. Adolph had been an usher at his wedding and had managed a private bill through the Senate on his behalf; and now Adolph thought he heard laughter in the chairman's voice. And so it continued through the alphabet until the applause began to build—and then George brusquely switched off the radio.

For a moment no one knew what to do or say. They looked to Adolph for a lead, but he gave none. There was general movement in the direction of the sideboard; everyone beginning to talk at once while they prepared their drinks, agreeing that betrayal could not go unpunished. Curly Peralta decided that the nominee had sent a dreadful signal: his word could not be trusted, and in national politics a man's word was his destiny. A bad beginning, Curly said, and the nominee—the Man—must needs be taught a lesson. The means were near to hand, allies to be enlisted without delay, friendly newspapermen, finance people, Senate colleagues—for was this not an affront to the dignity of the Senate?—state chairmen, religious leaders, members of the bar. Each man had his own list of markers to be called when the time came. God, what a mess.

The women listened from the billiards room, where they had resumed their card game. Young Axel remained in the shadows, hearing the gathering of the tricks and the shuffle, the falling of the cards and the thick silence before the bidding, the scratch of a match when one of the women lit a cigarette. In the Observatory the talk trailed away, growing softer—and then someone laughed and the others joined in. The women looked at each other and continued their aggressive play, their conversation barely a murmur. Axel wondered if this was what his father meant by the dream world of women. Unsited by temperament to the hard realities of government and politics, they lived in a half-light of illusion; they turned the facts to mean what they wanted them to mean, and perhaps in that way achieved their heart's desire. It would be a kind of freedom, amending or ignoring the rules the men made, playing cards while the world came to an end.

One no trump, Constance said, her voice soft as a feather.

Doubled, lone Peralta replied.

Meanwhile in the Observatory the weather was changing. Winter gave rise to spring, the hard ground suddenly loose and receptive. The men commenced to talk about the ticket, its strengths and liabilities, who would be with them and who against them and how strongly. They were breaking the nation down by region and class. They were dismantling it the way a mechanic dismantles an engine, appraising each part by

itself and then as a function of the other parts. The ticket had appeal to the middle of the nation and to farmers generally and white-collar voters. The Northeast was a problem. New York was a special problem, and the baby-faced Midwestern governor would be no help there. No help in the parishes and synagogues and no help in the union halls. They'd best hide the lap dog in the alfalfa. The election would be a mighty struggle to be sure, and how much better if the nominee had kept his word and chosen our good friend as his running mate. But we can't walk back the cat. What's done's done. If they were clever about it and campaigned with energy. If they put their money into the right pockets in the critical cities. If they stuck to the traditional principles of the party—well, then, we're winners.

Axel looked at George Steppe. The young man had not failed to notice that "they" had abruptly become "we."

"He doesn't know anything about Washington," Adolph said. "He's never lived here. He doesn't know the way we do things. He won't know who counts. He won't know how to preside over the Senate. He's too green. These outsiders always muck things up."

"He's not a quality man," George said. "But it's a strong ticket."

From the billiards room came a tinkle of laughter, Constance's successful finesse.

"Bad show," Sir Charles put in.

"This wouldn't happen in Britain," David Longfellow said.

"Certainly not by telephone," Sir Charles said, and that drew a smile from Adolph.

And then, boats catching the freshening breeze, they were off again, plotting the course of the campaign, identifying natural hazards, predicting strategy and tactics, and, conspicuously, who would be involved and who wouldn't be involved. One of them called it the great American holy war, and you volunteered cheerfully, rallying to the din of the megaphone. Neutrality was a sin, and how much better to direct things from headquarters rather than in the stink and blood of the trenches. Any candidate would covet their experience and practical knowledge. They were veterans all, with campaign ribbons to prove it—including, as of tonight, a Purple Heart, ha-ha. The Man will need all the help he can get, Senator Bilbauer said. He needs us. He'll come begging. The phone will ring any time now.

Listening to them, it was obvious even to young Axel that there would be no revenge, not that night or any night. And from the look on his face, Adolph Behl knew it, too. So he gave them his full attention as they gathered around the sideboard with their drinks, helping themselves to shrimp and crabcakes, all the while talking themselves back from the precipice. The compass began its swing: high emotion had given way to chaos, and chaos back to judgment. These were practical men. Tomorrow held more promise than yesterday, and government was forever. There was more than

one route to the top of the tree, and no one wanted to be left behind.

David Longfellow did not sense that the wind had shifted.

"God damn him," David said. "We're going to twist him the way he's twisted us, pardon my French. He's not clean. I happen to know about the woman he sees in New York and where he sees her. I know her name and where she lives and he knows I know. The Man's a whoremaster—"

"David," Judge Aswell said quietly. "Shut up."

"It's ammunition," the banker said lamely.

"Let's caucus," Curly said, rubbing his hands together.

"There's unfinished business here," George Steppe said, gesturing at the telephone.

"Yes," Curly said, looking at Adolph. But the senator did not turn from the window. Watching his father from the shadows, Axel could not erase the sight of his mother holding her arm and hissing, all burdened Galway in her distress, *You baaaassstard*. Now she was calmly dealing cards, telling another story as she stared coldly at her husband. He was standing alone at the rain-streaked window that gave out onto the rooftops and monuments of the capital. Low scud had moved in, and the darkness was as dull and restless as the surface of an ocean. He seemed lost in the humiliation of the telephone call. None of the others felt it as he did. They were his friends but like good horsemen they mounted again when they were thrown—or, to be exact about it, when a fellow rider was thrown. The race was not forfeit because a man fell off his horse, even if the circumstances were unfortunate or suspicious; the contest continued over the many, many furlongs remaining. This seemed to be the point that Curly Peralta was making, his high-pitched voice causing even the women to smile as they threw down their trumps. Everyone knew that revenge was a dish best eaten cold, but Curly was insisting that on this occasion it was a dish best refused.

"Don't you agree, Charles?"

They all turned to the portly Englishman examining the books in the low bookcases; they were books on the architecture of Washington, D.C. Sir Charles Rath looked up and muttered something noncommittal.

"Come on, Charles!" George Steppe's voice was loud. "Tell us your view of revenge. Do you take it or leave it?"

"Yes, Charles. Give us the benefit of your advice." This was Constance, her voice drifting in from the billiards room.

Sir Charles looked unsuccessfully at his friend for a signal. When Adolph gave

none, he decided that tact was a virtue. "My friend will do as he thinks best," the Englishman said mildly.

"So loyal, Charles," Constance said. "You're so loyal. It's such a lovely quality in men. It becomes you."

"The unfinished business," George said softly to Curly.

"It's positively inspiring," Constance said, her voice ragged around the edges.

Adolph wasn't listening. He lifted his shoulders and let them fall. "Revenge," he said, looking across the room at Sir Charles. "I'll have it the way that our mentor said to have it, 'Without haste, but without rest.'"

Sir Charles smiled bleakly, recognizing Goethe's thought.

"That's not your business," Stanley Greene said loudly. He had been listening attentively these many minutes, his smile growing as the compass swung. His view of human nature was as wide as a column of type. The old cynic was rarely disappointed, and now he cackled maliciously. "Revenge is my specialty," he said. "Leave the revenge to me and watch Sunday's paper." The editor drew on his cigar and blew a huge smoke ring that floated across the oval room until it touched an upright rose in a fluted vase and collapsed. He looked inquiringly at David Longfellow.

"Leave it alone," Judge Aswell said.

"You wouldn't be wanting to interfere with an editor's prerogative? You of all people, Justin. You who've been so forthright in support of freedom of expression. David has the scoop!" The editor smiled broadly, the smile fading when he saw David Longfellow shake his head; and with that, the whoremaster disappeared for good.

Old John had glided to Senator Behl's side, a whiskey on his silver tray. The senator shook his head and they stood looking out the window at the scud, breaking here and there to reveal the Capitol building and the Washington Monument, conspicuous in pink. John had been with him for many years. They were about the same height and age and might have been brothers, so closely did they resemble each other. They shared a bookish temperament and a love of horticulture. They were united in their dislike of the swampy weather in Washington, a climate so thick and swollen that anything grew. Constance's English garden was an incoherent brawl that threatened everyone's peace of mind. Any blockhead could make a garden in Washington.

They preferred the disciplined and windswept prairie back in the Midwest, "the State," as Adolph always called it, his constituency. He and John gardened together in the spring, cultivating perfectly aligned rows of white and yellow roses, row upon row. They experimented with hybrid roses, one particularly successful, and they called that the Behlbaver rose. John's surname was Baver. Constance maintained that the rose was

remembered by more Americans than any legislation her husband sponsored. Who cared about interstate commerce, the Behl Act? Only the railroads cared about it, and they didn't like it; Midwestern farmers liked it and forgot it. So they worked on their roses, loving the black soil and the harsh climate, a hard wind always blowing from the west ruffling the prairie grass. The senator thought the grass resembled the surface of the ocean, and the arrowheads he and John found no different from the bones of great fishes washed up on Atlantic beaches. Of course Constance hated it, so she always stayed behind at Echo House, or traveled with friends to the spa at the Greenbriar. The senator and John Bayer always came back to Washington with stories of the swarms of butterflies that arrived in the spring.

They stood companionably at the window flanked left and right by the senator's favorite pictures, Childe Hassam's drypoint sketch of a middle-aged Henry Adams and a dense Edward Hopper etching of a farmer's field at dusk. The mariner's telescope was between them, its polished brass and antique fittings giving the scene a preindustrial look. Suddenly they turned their heads, leaning forward like commuters awaiting a bus. They sighed in unison and the senator slumped as if his bones had gone soft. In the distance were bright starbursts, flashes of red, white, and blue glittering above the clouds, disappearing into them when spent. They were fireworks along the Potomac, party loyalists celebrating the triumphant convention and its heroic nominees.

John continued to hold the silver tray with its glass of whiskey, and when at last the senator took it, John glanced at Henry Adams as if he expected that Adams, too, wished to be served.

Adolph said, "Thank you, Johnny." He turned now and looked across the room at the wall and the ugly scar his glass had made. He tapped his chest and slowly reached into his inside jacket pocket and withdrew a sheaf of papers folded lengthwise, his acceptance speech. He wordlessly handed it to John Bayer.

"I'm so very sorry," John said. He slipped the speech under the tray, holding it with his fingers, and glided away to the pantry, pretending not to see Constance raise her empty glass, demanding a refill.

The party had been watching them at the window, waiting for John to leave so that the business at hand could be completed. Curly cleared his throat. "Senator," he said. "Listen to me a minute."

But Adolph did not turn from the window, where starbursts were still visible among the clouds.

"Listen to Curly," George said. "There's something we have to do here. It has to be done and you have to do it."

Curly said, "Make the phone call, Adolph. Make it while it still counts for something. Congratulate the son of a bitch, wish him luck, promise your support,

make a joke, give him the usual mumbo-jumbo. Tell him you wish things had turned out differently and you look forward to meeting with him at the earliest opportunity, discuss matters of mutual interest and so forth and so on. You know the drill."

Judge Aswell nodded gravely. "Do it, Adolph."

"One club," Constance said, tapping her cards on the table.

Curly placed the call himself. He waited, then spoke a few words and extended the earpiece to Adolph. And in that gesture and the worldly smile that went with it was the essence of their politics: compromise and magnanimity. Magnanimity in defeat, magnanimity in victory, each requiring largeness of spirit and practical knowledge of the way the world worked. As Curly had said, the usual mumbo-jumbo. The gesture announced: We are not bitter-enders. We do not whine or bang the spoon against the porridge bowl. We do not take revenge in the heat of battle or its aftermath. We struggle, and if we lose, we give way. We congratulate the winner and we pledge our loyalty because there will be other struggles on other days and our opponent today may be our ally tomorrow. Above all, we do not burn bridges. This is the government after all. Party loyalty counts for something and we stand with our brothers, always. It's bred in the bone.

Curly smiled broadly as he extended the earpiece to the senator, who was still looking out the window at the fireworks, fading now. There was some small noise from the telephone, a sound like the crackling of fire. The women paused in their bridge game, listening hard. Constance's fingers were suspended above the table like a seer's, her trump ready to fall, her expression unruly. Stanley Greene leaned carelessly against the mantel, his dark eyes hooded, watching Adolph Behl with the most open prurience; he seemed to be committing everything to memory. Curly extended his arm, exasperated, shaking the earpiece.

George said, "Come on, Senator. Get it over with."

No one was watching more closely or listening more acutely than young Axel Behl, still inconspicuous in the shadows. His father was almost close enough to touch, and then he turned from the window with an expression as confused as his son had ever seen; and he never saw it again. The senator looked around, blinking; the light caught his hair and turned it white. His hair seemed to rise in coils. He made as if to say something, and when no words came, he shook his head and strode from the room with no backward glances except to look with loathing at the crescent-shaped scar on the wall. Curly was left with the earpiece hanging in dead air.

Constance slapped her card on the table and called loudly for old John, but everyone was listening to Curly's soothing voice, My goodness, Adolph was here just a moment ago, he must have stepped out, but don't you worry, he's on board one hundred percent as we all are, though naturally he wishes things had been handled differently. You know how these things are, when you expect one thing and get another, naturally there's irritation. But the hard feelings will pass...

Curly turned his back and spoke privately, and then his high-pitched laugh ended the conversation.

"Let's open the Champagne, John," Curly said.

"Yes," Constance said brightly. "Let's do."

When John arrived with a tray of glasses and three unopened bottles of Champagne, the company was silent, each man pondering Adolph's refusal to put things right. Was it an act of conscience? Vainglory? Simple anger? Perhaps he did not trust himself to speak, seeing betrayal on all sides. Perhaps all of the above, and perhaps none. Perhaps it was his dislike of the swampy weather in Washington, where any blockhead could make a rose grow. But his behavior was as out of character for him as it would have been for his great hero, Henry Adams. Not to mention Wolfgang von Goethe, Germany's greatest soul. This was not the first time in his long life in politics that a man had broken his promise and gone back on his word, so great are the temptations of public office. In politics the rewards of victory are tremendous. Nothing must be allowed to stand in the way of victory, because in politics runners-up don't count. The journalist's "gallant effort" reads nicely, but no one in the business cares about it.

Judge Aswell sighed. "Well, that's it. Adolph has decided to burn his bridges and ours too while he's at it. Our nominee's a vindictive bastard, likes his loyalties undivided, likes to scorch the earth when they're not. I can't imagine what got into Adolph. Has he lost his mind?" The judge turned to Curly Peralta for confirmation, but Curly was giving none. He only shook his head sadly while watching old John wrestle with the Champagne's wire and foil. His loyalty was to his old friend, no matter how badly the friend had mishandled the brief. Of course that did not mean that you went to war. The enemy of your friend had many friends who were also your friends, and the stakes were not small.

"He let his emotions rule," George Steppe said coldly. "And now he has to live with the consequences. The problem's his to solve. Trouble is, we all have money in the pot. What did you say to the Man, Curly?"

"The usual," Curly said.

George nodded decisively. "That's the way we do business in this house," he said to a murmur of agreement. "When a decision's made by our leader, we unite behind him. We make the call of congratulations and we promise our support because tomorrow is more important than yesterday. If we don't like the decision, we can quit. We can join the other side. We can sulk. But don't expect to be forgiven."

George Steppe's ringmaster's moustache flared, and Axel knew that he was in the presence of an impresario; the show went on, no matter what. He knew also that for his father tomorrow was not more important than yesterday. Probably for him it was the reverse; the sum of all the yesterdays equals tomorrow unless you believed in

miracles. He surely didn't expect to be forgiven. Axel understood then that his father could be humiliated and that the insult was not political; it was personal. They had rejected *him*, and so he would leave the field and return to his Behlbavers and his butterflies and his committee chairmanship in the Senate. Of course he would redeem his bleak promise of revenge "without haste but without rest." Axel knew also that his father had tried to cross the Rubicon, and it was the wrong Rubicon. In any case, he was alone in his distress.

Old John opened the Champagne at last, turning the corks with his fingers so that they made no sound. The bottles were sweating and fuming at the mouth, the aroma of Champagne mixed now with eau de Cologne and bath soap. The women had assembled silently in the doorway, their faces as impassive as any jury's. They glittered with ornaments—necklaces, earrings, silver combs in their hair. The men waited patiently until the women were served, old John delivering the glasses one by one, finally to lone Peralta and Constance. Then they helped themselves, and still no one spoke.

Constance motioned for Axel to join her. She put her arm around his shoulders, the company startled at how much they resembled each other, black hair center-parted, eyes that seemed chiseled from the same black stone. Constance raised her glass and smiled grimly.

"A toast to my son, Axel. To Axel, next in line. To Axel on his birthday."

Everyone drank and sang one disorganized chorus of *Happy Birthday*, the men suddenly subdued.

Then Curly Peralta stepped forward. With a sharp look at Constance, he said, "To the nominees of our party, the next President and Vice President of the United States."

The men drained their glasses. Curly threw his into the fireplace and took another from the tray on the sideboard. The others followed suit, except for Constance, who neither drank nor broke her glass, yet stood in such a way that no one doubted who presided at Echo House.

Many years later Axel Behl told the story to his son, Alec, then a teenager. Old enough to appreciate the stakes. Old enough to grasp the ironies, as Axel said. The moment was morbidly apt. They had walked across the street from Echo House to Soldiers Cemetery and were standing before the stele that announced B E H L, a rose sculpted above the name, and below it an inscription in German, *Goethe's Art is long, life short; judgment difficult, opportunity transient*. Constance's selection, it went without saying; she had outlived the senator by five years, dying alone in the Observatory on the eve of Hitler's march into Poland.

Axel leaned heavily on his cane as he spoke. Alec was looking at him strangely, and he guessed that his right eye was drooping, the long scar on his face livid. His voice had risen, too, and he was sweating. He reached to massage his ruined knee and continued softly, "She was fierce, fiercer than he was. When she died I was out of touch. I'd been sent to Lisbon on war business. Curly Peralta handled the arrangements, and I didn't learn the circumstances until much later."

"I hardly remember her," Alec said. What he did remember were unforgiving eyes and a sarcastic tongue. She seemed to believe that life had let her down badly. Sylvia, his mother, called her a connoisseur of misfortune.

Axel reached with his cane to dislodge a bit of lichen on the stele. "So there I was in the famous Observatory, a shadow witness to how grown men behaved at a private moment of betrayal. I was invisible except when my mother, God bless her, proposed her toast. The king was dead, long live the king. And this much was true for me: in some unconscious way I chose my career that night, not the precise function but the form of it, where I would place myself in the scramble to the top of the tree. Meaning the government, because that's our family's milieu. That's what we do. That's what he did, that's what I do, and you will, too, when the time comes. We don't know how to do anything else."

And it had made them all so happy, Alec thought but did not say.

"Why, you were born the night Frank Roosevelt was nominated. Your mother likes to tell the story that when I called from the convention floor and the nurse said you'd arrived, I didn't ask whether you were a boy or a girl. I had to tell your mother about the five ballots and how California caved and what a great day it was for the nation. You know the story, a family joke."

Axel paused, out of breath. He took a tiny vial from his coat pocket, tapped a pill into his palm, and swallowed it dry. He sighed and bit his lip. Someone had wandered within earshot. In a moment the intruder was gone, and Axel spoke again.

"You're in it for the long haul. You give your loyalty to the *state*, don't you see? Nothing else matters. You know what the Stalinists say. Let them starve! Let them starve! The last two left: alive will be communists for life. That's it exactly."

Alec said, "Your face is awful pale. Are you all right? Can I get you a glass of water?"

"My father disappointed us all, quitting as he did. And it was his own fault entirely. So inside the Observatory at Echo House that night I knew that I never wanted to be dependent on a promise that could be withdrawn over a telephone line—sorry to put it like this, Axel old boy, but I've made other plans, no hard feelings I hope, and let's stay in touch. I never wanted to learn the mumbo-jumbo and say that everything was fine when it wasn't fine. I suppose in that way only I am my father's son. I intended to be in the tree with my own juju. And I guess that's how it worked

out, good for them, good for me. You know the story about the expert mimic? The one with the repertoire of a hundred voices in a dozen languages and in due course he forgot his own voice. He forgot what he sounded like and couldn't remember even in his dreams at night."

Alec said, "Dad, your face—"

"You never knew this, so I'll tell you now. Constance was determined that I take my father's place in the Senate, and when the time came put forward my own candidacy for President of the United States. She bought a little farm in Maryland so that I'd have a State to run from. That was her great dream, the ambition that would cancel her husband's lust for second best, the disaster that brought such shame on Echo House. And until that night in the Observatory, her dream was my dream, too."

"Honestly, you don't look well."

"But I've sold the farm, so you don't have a State. You'll have to make your own plans."

Alec was silent.

"You know about the Rubicon, Alec. It's only a little stream, even when Caesar crossed it. Only a few yards wide and a few feet deep, so narrow in places you could jump across. The Rubicon makes the Potomac look like the Amazon." Then Axel threw back his head and laughed loudly, tapping the stele with his cane. "Do you know what she gave me that night for a birthday present?"

Alec shook his head. He had no idea. His father was sputtering with laughter, his face ghostly white except for the livid scar. He reached to touch the stele, tracing the engraved rose with his fingernail.

"A pretty little nineteenth-century print," Axel said. "Not rare. Not valuable. You've seen it many times. It's in the Observatory next to Sylvia's merry satyr. A pastel, Constance's dream come true: the doge's palace at Venice in the early morning sunshine." And then Axel's smile vanished and he added, "The next day my father gave me his most prized volume, a signed first edition of *Democracy*. Some day it'll be yours."

PART I