

# ONE



The president-elect stared into the mirror and struggled to tie the knot in his two-thousand-dollar silver Brioni tie as his fingers shook. He was surprised at how jumpy he was now that the moment he yearned for, dreamed of, and fought for his entire career had finally arrived. Satisfied at last with the knot, he gazed back at his reflection in the mirror. He noted with pleasure that his morning coat fit him snugly, the silvery tie and vest highlighting the streaks of grey in his wavy brown hair. The heels on his spit-polished alligator cowboy boots took his height to just over six feet. His steely blue eyes were open and inviting, reflecting his expansive mood.

Upstairs, an army of beauticians and hairstylists flown in from New York and Beverly Hills worked on the future First Lady's image. Rapid footsteps on the wooden floor above conveyed harried preparations. A dress assistant flown in by Oscar de la Renta, the design house providing two dresses for the inauguration, joined them. The entire production—hair, makeup, manicure, and wardrobe—was taking more time than landing the 82nd Airborne at Normandy.

The president-elect looked at his watch. His blood pressure spiked. They were supposed to be at St. John's Episcopal Church for the traditional prayer service in four minutes.

"Claire!"

No response. More frantic footsteps.

"Claire!"

"Coming!" came the cry from behind the bedroom door.

“Claire, we have to leave right now!” he shouted. “The president and First Lady will be standing outside waiting, and the whole world will see that I can’t arrive at my own inauguration on time.”

Bob Long, former governor of California, claimed the peak of American politics after winning the most bizarre presidential campaign in U.S. history. Defeated for the Democratic nomination at a convention tainted by corruption, he entered the race as an independent initially seen as merely a spoiler, and his candidacy caught fire with voters turned off by the partisan bickering in Washington. When no candidate won a majority in the electoral college, the election went to the House of Representatives. Long won an astonishing victory and became the first independent candidate elevated to the presidency in U.S. history.

Out of the fog of nerves and confusion, an advance man approached. “Governor, POTUS and FLOTUS are moving from the residence. ETA, three minutes,” he said, using acronyms for the president and First Lady. “Should we tell them to . . . wait?”

Long looked at the advance man with a mixture of dread and panic. Then, as if on cue, Claire Long appeared at the top of the stairs, her hair pulled up, pearls the size of miniature golf balls on her neck, wearing a stunning royal blue dress with matching pillbox hat. “Well?” she asked triumphantly, spreading her arms. “Am I worth the wait?”

Long let out a long whistle. “You look just . . . incredible! You look like a modern Jackie Kennedy.”

“Thank you, Mr. President,” she said.

She glided down the stairs, chin held high, followed by a retinue for hair and makeup and brushed his cheek with her lips. That was when he caught the scent of vodka masked with expensive perfume. He shook it off. *Claire probably had a Bloody Mary with brunch to take the edge off*, he thought.

Long introduced himself to the makeup team enthusiastically. “You guys did a fantastic job. I love the hair. Which one of you is the hairstylist?”

“I’m a hair artist,” replied a short woman wearing tight black jeans, a black T-shirt and reddish-purple hair.

“Forgive me,” Long replied with a touch of sarcasm. “I didn’t mean to give you a demotion. Of course you’re an artist. And that goes for all of you.”

They headed down the hall to the front door. “Hair artist, eh?” whispered Long. “I guess that means she’s expensive.”

“Not as expensive as me, honey,” replied Claire.

The door opened and the Secret Service detail led the way to the waiting limousine. Long felt his heart rate quicken. It was all really happening.

ACROSS LAFAYETTE PARK, JAY Noble took a final sip of coffee as he finished a brunch fit for a king at the Hay-Adams Hotel. He downed an egg-white omelet, a plate of bacon (he was trying the low-carb thing), a bowl of fruit, and a syrup-drenched plate of French toast (okay, maybe not the whole Atkin’s thing). His thatch of brown hair, combed more neatly than usual, had a telltale hint of gray at the sides, white hairs he gained as the architect of one of the most brutal presidential victories ever recorded. His high forehead, cherubic cheeks, and laconic posture telegraphed an attitude of smug satisfaction. Completely out of character for an aging political hack, he wore a tailored Hugo Boss suit. He held the china cup with three fingers. A fleet of waiters flitted around the table, the maître d’ and manager did table visits, and other patrons craned their necks to see if it was really him. And why not? Jay was the political maestro who masterminded Bob Long’s rise to the presidency.

“Not to pry, but why aren’t you taking Lisa to the ball?” asked David Thomas, Long’s campaign manager and recently named White House political director. He was referring to Lisa Robinson, the black-haired, angular beauty who ran the press shop in the Long campaign, and who recently jetted off to an exotic eco-resort in Mexico with Jay.

Jay let the dead air hang. Should he tell the truth or feed Thomas the same spin he gave everyone else? He chose the latter.

“It’s complicated,” he sighed. “Lisa’s going to be White House communications director, and I’m the president’s chief strategist.” He shot Thomas a sly look. “Besides, I live by the rule that you keep your private parts out of the payroll.”

Thomas, a born sucker for locker-room talk, smiled knowingly. “You’re right. But it’s still tragic,” he said, shaking his head. “Lisa’s hot—and smart.”

“She’s got the trifecta,” Jay agreed. “Body, brains, personality.” He let out a long sigh. “But there are plenty of other fish in the sea.”

Jay was relieved that no one knew the truth, which was that he asked Lisa to be his date and she had turned him down flat. She needed to do her job,

she insisted, and that meant being taken seriously by the press corps. They would “remain friends,” she assured him. Pretending not to be crushed, Jay agreed. He had to admit she had solid instincts when it came to navigating negative press coverage. But a week later Jay read in the Style section of the *Washington Post* that Lisa was going with Senator Russell Evans of Tennessee, the fifty-four-year-old bachelor freshly divorced from the reigning queen of country music. Evans was one of the most notorious skirt-chasers on Capitol Hill, showing up at cocktail parties in DC with a different blonde on his arm every week. This was Lisa’s idea of being taken seriously?

“So you’re flying solo?” asked Thomas.

“No,” replied Jay. He leaned back in his chair, trying to play it cool. “I’m taking Satcha Sanchez.”

Thomas shot him a surprised look. “The Latina infobabe?”

“It’s all part of my Hispanic outreach strategy,” said Jay. He let out a rapid-fire, evil laugh.

Thomas chuckled. “You’re too much.” Jay waved for the check. As he signed the bill, he saw Thomas’s eyes widen. “Well, what do you know . . . speak of the devil.”

Jay turned around to see Satcha’s five-foot-six-inch frame gliding across the room, hips swaying hypnotically, her hourglass figure wrapped in a fire-engine red dress with a plunging neckline. Her red lips formed an alluring smile, and her black hair with light brown highlights teased into an on-air bouffant that bounced as she stepped in Christian Louboutin heels. She carried a full-length mink coat over her arm.

“Subtle she is not,” said Thomas under his breath.

The men rose from the table as Jay dipped his head in a gentlemanly bow. “You look *mahvelous*,” he said to Satcha.

“Thank you, sugar,” replied Satcha matter-of-factly. Her eyes sized up Jay’s outfit. “Love the suit. *You are styling!*” A waiter appeared, pulling back Satcha’s chair and holding her mink gingerly as though it were still alive. “Bottega loaned me the dress. If I decide to keep it, I can get it at a discount. But the mink is mine. Is it too much for television?”

“Absolutely not!” joked Jay. “It’s positively understated.”

Satcha shot him a sideward glance of mock disapproval. Her drop-dead looks and come-hither TV persona, spiced with a dollop of Latin sensuality, formed her into a symbol of Hispanic power. The ubiquitous Satcha was the empress of the Latino vote, her visage staring down from billboards and out

from magazine covers as she covered the campaign and moderated presidential debates for Univision. A Puerto Rican journalist of Cuban descent, she started out in San Antonio as a meteorologist, then moved on to the Weather Channel before hitting it big at Univision, garnering higher ratings than the major networks in New York, LA, Houston, Chicago, and Miami. *People* magazine named her one of the “50 Most Beautiful People.” With Satcha on his arm, Jay was guaranteed plenty of buzz, a play for Hispanic votes, and a measure of sweet revenge against Lisa.

“Are you coming to the ceremony?” asked Thomas.

“No, I have to work,” replied Satcha with a frown. “I’m anchoring the inaugural coverage, and I stay on the air to cover the parade.” She made a face. “I just don’t know if I can make myself sound interested as I announce the marching band from Columbus, Ohio.”

“You want us to help you get some senators and congressmen to stop by the skybox so you can do some interviews?” asked Jay.

“That would be great!” Satcha’s face lit up. “Get people close to Long. I don’t want anyone who is boring. I’m looking only for important people.”

“You mean like me?” Jay asked, his face cracking into a smile.

“Not you, sweetie,” she volleyed. “Univision signed off on my going to the ball tonight, but if the suits think I’m getting too political, they will go nuts.”

“You mean you have to be careful about press coverage?” asked Thomas.

“They won’t leave me alone,” Satcha sighed. “The only thing worse is no one talking about you, right?”

Jay waved over the waiter, who returned and slid the mink on Satcha. The power couple breezed from the lobby as the doormen held the door, the frigid January air blasting through the entrance. More heads turned and fingers pointed as they flew out of the hotel.

IN THE PRESIDENTIAL SUITE of the Willard Hotel, the Reverend Andrew H. Stanton held court in a living room the size of a basketball court, surrounded by the usual clutch of aides and hangers-on, gathered like a highly compensated peanut gallery on a large sofa and several wing chairs. Like any religious broadcaster worth his salt, Andy traveled with a posse the size of a hip-hop artist. Today it included three ministry vice presidents

and their wives, several drivers, two security guards, Mrs. Stanton, Andy's four children and their spouses, and a press secretary. Also joining them was Ross Lombardy, Andy's political right hand. Everyone had VIP tickets to the inauguration and the balls, which Ross obtained by calling in every chit he had at the inaugural committee. Twenty-nine VIP tickets to the ceremony? No problem, Mr. Lombardy! After all, Stanton delivered an estimated thirty million evangelical votes to Long on election day. Ross also obtained parking passes, which was fortunate because the delegation required six SUVs just to drive the short distance to the Capitol.

"Can you believe they asked to see my prayer in *advance!*?" Andy fairly bellowed. "I'm not going to let some bureaucrat edit *my* prayer."

"I believe it, sir," replied Ross, whose day job was serving as executive director of the Faith and Family Federation. "They want to make sure it's politically correct."

"Meaning *what?*" asked Andy, his face twisted with righteous indignation.

"Meaning no J-word," said Ross. "God is good, God is great. But Jesus offends some people." He shrugged with a political operative's nonchalance.

"Too bad," shot back Andy, his blue eyes smoldering. "Jesus is my Lord and Savior. I'm not ashamed of the gospel." He enunciated each syllable.

The vice presidents grunted their approval with an "Amen."

"Can't you make it ecumenical?" asked Ross, pressing. "Why stir the pot?"

"You're the political guy; I'm the pastor. Leave the prayers to me."

"Then there's the Muslim thing," Ross coolly added. "We're in a global war on terror. Long's folks are spooked by anything that might be construed by the Arab street as relaunching the Crusades." Other than Long's inaugural address, Andy's prayer would be one of the highlights of the ceremony, seen or heard by over a billion people. It could spark an international incident if Andy "went Moses," as they liked to call it around New Life Ministries. Ross fielded several worried calls from the Long camp about Andy's prayer. He gave them all the same answer: no one would see or hear the prayer until Andy delivered it at the Capitol.

"Do you realize what today means?" asked one of Andy's obsequious aides. "You're the new Billy Graham."

Andy frowned, dipping his chin and clasping his hands firmly behind his back. "There'll never be another Billy. Besides, I'm controversial, too political, don't ya know."

"Billy prayed with presidents; Andy elects 'em," corrected Ross with a wicked grin. He turned to Andy. "Andy, you're Billy, Richard Daley, and Samuel Gompers all rolled into one."

Andy seemed momentarily taken aback by the comment. Then suddenly he broke into a little-boy grin and cackled with laughter, clapping his hands as he enjoyed the joke at his own expense. The posse, lined up on the couch like blow-up dolls, helmet hair frozen into place by too much hair spray, chuckled nervously. The comment struck close to home, but Andy's self-deprecating sense of humor gave everyone else permission to laugh.

The door swung open and a security guard stood at attention. "Reverend Stanton, time to go, sir."

Andy, followed in single file by the posse, headed out of the suite to an elevator.

SENATE MAJORITY LEADER SALMON Stanley strode through the Capitol Rotunda on his way to the inauguration of his sworn enemy wearing the plastic face of a defeated candidate. His puffy, white countenance masked the trauma beneath: resentment at Long's successful betrayal of the Democratic party and his preternaturally charmed rise, anger at the investigation of his campaign by a Republican Justice Department, and bitterness at the vicious attacks on his candidacy from the media. Still, Stanley was determined to grit his teeth and get through the ordeal, if only to deny his enemies the joy of his absence. But that didn't make it any more pleasant. Even though he claimed to have a hide as thick as an elephant, Stanley's wound went deep.

"We'll get through it fine," Stanley said in a hollow voice to his chief of staff, walking briskly beside him. "My father used to say, 'Son, when you get knocked down, get up, dust yourself off, and keep putting one foot in front of the other.'"

"You're a far better man than the one taking the oath of office today," the aide replied.

"Maybe," Stanley said. "Sometimes you just have to put the country first. John Adams left town rather than attend Jefferson's inaugural. Not

me. I'm going to be on that platform when he takes the oath." He paused. "I'm not a quitter."

"Absolutely not," the aide agreed.

The rotunda was eerily silent save for the echo of their footsteps. A few stragglers passed awkwardly, averting their eyes. A security guard who normally waved at the majority leader simply looked away. Clearly, it was going to be a tough day.

"Will you go again in four years? I hope so." The aide turned philosophical.

"I don't know," said Stanley. "That's a long way off." Stanley turned to the aide with a twinkle in his eye. "The first step in a comeback is survival. And I am a survivor."

They walked down the stairs leading to the doorway to the west front of the Capitol. As he came down the stone passageway, the director of the ceremony greeted him and escorted him onto the sun-splashed stage where he was greeted by muffled applause from glove-handed admirers. He took his seat on the second row. It struck him that he would be sitting less than ten feet from Long when he ascended to the office they had both sought. He adjusted his scarf, checked the buttons on his overcoat, and braced himself against the cold.