

THE CHOOSERS

Prologue

THE MAN IN THE TOGA GLANCED AT his colleague in the tweed sport jacket. He closed his weary eyes. His words were labored. His once vibrant voice was almost a whisper.

“We have no choice. We looked at every possible scenario. It pains me to say it, but he must die. We must end his life this very afternoon.”

The man in the tweed sport jacket took a few short puffs on his pipe. He spoke in a clipped British accent. “So it is said, so it shall be done.” He took another few puffs. “Tiber, my friend, I’ve never seen you so distressed. I’ve never seen you take it so personally. I’ve never seen your spirit so fatigued.”

Tiber opened his eyes and pointed at his toga. “I have worn this garment for two thousand years. The material is tattered, and inside I am just as worn. Caesar was a stern taskmaster, but this job...no one should have to see what we see and do what we must do. I can not, must not, continue this much longer.”

The man with the pipe sighed. “I understand my friend. Your service has been exceedingly commendable. It has been exemplary. But let us get back to the matter at hand. You know his life must be extinguished. I do not enjoy ending a man’s days on earth. Every breath is a blessing and this man deserves to be blessed. Our other colleagues believe you are the compassionate one, but you know I bleed, as well. This one leaves me greatly distressed for when I look at this man it is as if I am looking into a mirror. I never take any of our decisions lightly, especially this one. But as the French say, *C’est la vie*.”

Tiber was amused by Hargrove with his British inflection attempting to portray a perfect French accent. However, he was dismayed by his reference. “Such is life? You miss the point my friend. Life is about living and more importantly it is about dying on one’s own terms, not on the strings of some puppeteer.”

“Tiber, my friend, philosophizing has never been your strong

suit.”

“You are correct, Dr. Hargrove, but I have never tried to be a philosopher. I much prefer listening to music. It has been my only relaxation during all of my struggles. The works of Beethoven, Bach, Schubert and Gershwin have been my salvation.”

“Tiber, if you are going to wax poetic about melody, I have always fancied those lads from Liverpool—Lennon and McCartney.”

“I too enjoy their renditions. But one song in particular has stuck in my head during this past century. It was back in 1956. Doris Day sang ‘Que será será, whatever will be will be; the future’s not ours to see, Que será será.’ ”

Franklin Hargrove took a few additional puffs of his pipe reflected on the irony and walked towards Tiber. Placing his hand on his friend’s shoulder Hargrove shook his own head almost imperceptibly from side to side, grimacing all the while. Through squinted eyes his head moved in a nodding motion and his mouth shifted into a slight smirk. It was not a sign of arrogance or superiority. It was more a signal of inevitability. The die had been cast. “But you know better than that my friend.... The future *is ours to see*. Whatever will be is what *we say* it should be.”

Chapter One

PROFESSOR DAVID MASTERSON sat in his office at Columbia University. Masterson was preparing for his first class of the fall semester. It was always an exhilarating feeling to return to his teaching after taking his annual summer break. After finishing his latest manuscript at the end of June he had taken the rest of the summer to vacation with his family.

Dr. Masterson was world renowned for the many books he published in the field of ethics. The President of Columbia, Lawrence Vincent, met Masterson at a conference and always admired his work. The opportunity presented itself seven years earlier to offer Masterson a unique appointment as a “University Professor.” The invitation to join the faculty gave Masterson the

ability to teach legal ethics at the law school, business ethics to the MBA business school candidates, and even guest lecture in conjunction with the medical school on the ethical considerations of medicine.

However, his favorite group to teach was the undergraduate students who were less jaded than those at the professional schools. They were not as focused on the all mighty dollar as compared to the business, law and medical students he encountered. They were still free thinkers, and their passion for causes and life itself was undaunted.

Unfortunately he found the dot com craze began to poison even this group of fertile thinkers. The potential of unimagined riches at a very young age was beginning to corrupt aspects of the undergraduate experience. When those potential riches dried up, he felt he had his student's undivided attention once more.

Masterson sat at his desk and was ready to consume his normal pre-game meal. He always thought of walking into a mass lecture akin to an athletic contest. Back in the days when he played on the Dartmouth Rugby Team a few of his acquaintances participated in the Boston Marathon. They favored the intake of pasta as their preparatory meal. Therefore David recommended it to the rugby team and it became a staple of their pre-game tradition. Before each match the team would load up on carbohydrates helping the players sustain energy levels during the long and grueling competition.

Since a pasta dish was difficult to procure while sitting in one's university office, David decided on an alternative ritual. Instead he habitually downed a can of soda along with two jelly donuts. He stopped at Dunkin Donuts on the way to the university and there was a soda machine in the hallway leading to his office. He never pushed the button for a Diet Coke. It had to be Classic Coke. Real sugar was the taste his body craved. It was his routine before every lecture for the last five years.

He had taken his first bite of a jelly donut and two sips of Coke when his office phone rang. Recently his young son Austin was interested in using the telephone and took every opportunity to speak with his father.

Austin was anxious to inform his father about his first half-day of second grade. As always he talked a mile a minute. It was hard for the esteemed professor to get a word in edge wise.

“Daddy it was fun. My teacher is Mrs. Curtis and she is so nice. She has curly brown hair just like me. She read us a story about a fisherman. I told her how we always go fishing, and how we use real worms, not the fake things other people use. I told her me and my Daddy are real fishing men. She said she fished with her daddy when she was a little girl.”

Austin continued to talk as David listened faithfully. Afterwards his wife Dana got on the phone. As always, they ended their conversation telling each other “I love you.” David glanced at his watch and realized he would need to move quickly if he wasn’t going to be late for the first lecture of the semester.

His hands would be fully occupied. He needed to carry a few handouts and the all-important syllabus. He had a few hundred copies of each, not to mention his class roster. He would be unable to carry the two donuts or the opened can of soda. A single bite from the donut and the small amount of soda he consumed would have to suffice. So much for his customary pre-lecture food intake; David knew he would dazzle them anyway. He always did.

Masterson left his office and walked briskly across the campus to meet his undergraduate class. It was a beautiful day and he felt so alive! It was a new millennium filled with excitement and promise.

On the first day of a new semester the campus was always abuzz with activity. Today was no exception, especially since a presidential election was about two months away. Students set up tables on behalf of George W. Bush, but the students gathering around the posts supporting Al Gore outnumbered those of his opponent by about an eight-to-one ratio on the liberal Ivy League campus.

He especially loved his walks through the campus in late October. The foliage invigorated his mind and his soul. He was always enthralled by the way the sunlight almost blinded him through the tree line as the rust and orange colors delighted his senses. Even more so, he loved early May when the flowers were in bloom and the academic year was coming to a close. This was why he would only take a job in the Northeast. Having grown up in New England, he couldn’t give up the cyclical changes of the seasons.

The real reason he appreciated the end of the spring semester was because no matter how much he enjoyed teaching and

writing, he loved spending the summer on Martha's Vineyard with his family even more. Despite his prolific track record as a scholar, David never worked while he was at the beach. He used the summer months to recharge his batteries. He sometimes jotted down an idea or two after taking a long walk on the water's edge, but he refused to write more than a few sentences. He knew if he wrote a few paragraphs he wouldn't stop until he finished another book. The summer was for himself and his family.

His wife Dana was the most incredible woman he could ever imagine. The couple had three great kids. Emma was sixteen, Sara was twelve, and the little guy, Austin, was seven.

Eight years earlier, Dana accompanied him to Texas, where he gave a series of lectures in Dallas and Houston, ending up at a two-day symposium at the University of Texas at Austin. She very rarely traveled with him, because their daughters were very young at the time. That Friday night they went bar hopping on Sixth Street and had a night for the ages. Afterwards, they went back to their hotel room and made love until the morning light peeked its way through the window. When Dana later found out she was pregnant, they decided to name Austin after the city in which he was conceived.

He felt so fortunate to own an incredible beach house. He spent many memorable childhood summers in the house at "The Vineyard" which belonged to his family for generations. He considered himself a "Vineyarder," and his children would tell all of their friends in New Jersey when they returned each summer they were "Islanders."

His world was rocked when his parents died in a tragic fire while vacationing at a Las Vegas hotel. It happened during his doctoral studies at Harvard. When he inherited the beach house it became his prized material possession. He had been an only child and it was his only connection to his family roots.

He missed his parents terribly and after the fire he never took life for granted. He craved a family of his own, and when Dana entered his life he knew she would be the one he would grow old with, walking hand in hand on the beach as the sun set over The Vineyard.

David felt blessed with three beautiful and loving children. Despite the rigors of his demanding schedule, he usually found time to be with them. There were some periods when he was

deficient, and the summers off the southern coast of Cape Cod always made up for the other times when he wasn't as attentive to the children as he wished he could be.

Emma, at sixteen, had grown up to be a stunning young woman, a fact that hadn't escaped the many young men on the beach. She came in late most nights and her active social life was beginning to erode the cozy family cohesion they experienced in previous summers.

For the first time since the kids were born, David realized the children wouldn't remain exclusively under his roof forever. He was relieved to return to their suburban home in Tenafly, New Jersey. Although Emma had her friends at home, the lack of family unity was not as noticeable when everyone was following their own day-to-day routines.

He didn't fault Emma; it was just part of the normal maturation process. In fact, Emma tried her best to be with the family and often included her younger sister, Sara, whenever it was feasible. It wouldn't be long before Sara found outside interests, as well.

It would leave more time to go fishing with Austin, and more opportunity to take long sunset walks with Dana. They would relive the times spent before the children were born. Each evening, they would hold hands as the sun disappeared into the horizon. He imagined the feel of every grain of sand between their toes as the ocean kicked water at their feet.

How he loved The Vineyard. How he loved Dana. How he loved the children.