

The Voice of Prophets

a novel by

Alan Simon

Copyright © 2022 Alan Simon. All Rights Reserved.

*If the voice of prophets blew
on flutes made of martyred children's bones
and exhaled airs burnt with martyrs' cries;
If they built a bridge of old men's dying groans;
Ear of mankind
occupied with small sounds,
would you hear?*

- Traditional Yom Kippur reading

Prologue

This time, their false messiah arrived unencumbered by the damning baggage that opponents might repeatedly and frantically use to counter him, albeit with scant success.

No shady financial and business past, hallmarked by one outsized failure after another, rectified only through revisionist history and clandestine, Faustian recapitalization.

No readily disprovable “hyperbole” spouted day after day.

No easily discoverable affairs with an array of women over the years that had to be explained away via clumsily constructed denials; the disavowals embraced only by the truest of believers, yet the sordid tales themselves readily shunted aside by so many.

No persistent concerns about mental fitness that needed to be slapped away as “fake news” and “an attempted takedown.”

No gross incompetence and blatant self-dealing, unveiled almost daily, that needed to be indignantly minimized through the de facto state media’s repertoire of *1984*-ish Newspeak.

Once again, their false messiah tapped into their ugliest instincts and most vile impulses, mustering the dark armies onto the battlefield to unquestioningly do his bidding.

This time, their false messiah had risen from their own ranks, and was truly one of them.

This time, their false messiah’s dark vision for immutably altering every facet of the American landscape came tightly packaged alongside competence and patience.

This time, their false messiah would prove unstoppable.

Part I
Lunatic Fringe

March–May 2033

*“Lunatic fringe, I know you’re out there;
You’re in hiding and you hold your meetings.
I can hear you coming and I know what you’re after.”*

- Red Rider, *Lunatic Fringe*

PERMISSIONS

Lunatic Fringe

Words and Music by Tom Cochrane

Copyright © 1981 SKY IS FALLING ENT., INC.

All Rights in the U.S. and Canada Controlled and Administered by UNIVERSAL — POLYGRAM
INTERNATIONAL PUBLISHING, INC. All Rights Reserved

Used by Permission

Reprinted by permission of Hal Leonard LLC

Chapter 1

The lunatic fringe was, in reality, no longer the fringe, and hadn't been for years. They had been legitimized. They had planted their flags and claimed their territory. They remained joined together as a collective voice that was perpetually amplified through the corrupt, depraved melting pot of provocative talk radio programs, televised agitprop masquerading as news, and incendiary internet sites. Social media remained the glue that connected and bound the true believers directly with one another. Conspiracy theories abounded, each one more outlandish than the last. Domination and pitiless punishment were the idols they worshipped. They comfortably led post-coherence lives, untroubled by conflicting and incompatible beliefs effortlessly coexisting inside their minds.

No longer marginalized, they had made their mark on every aspect of American life. Many from their ranks continued to ooze their way into political offices and judicial appointments at all levels of the American system, and elsewhere around the troubled world. Their influence ebbed and flowed; but as with the heartiest viruses, that influence would never be eradicated. Much like a vampire tightly shackled inside his coffin, the creature would periodically lie there for a stretch of time, waiting impatiently for the chains to be carelessly removed so he could resume wreaking havoc on those who had grown complacent or had simply forgotten.

The degree of concern from those who would oppose the once-fringe likewise ebbed and flowed. When relative stability finally returned to American life in the latter years of the 2020s, the heightened state of alarm sounded for years by the mainstream media pundits, pragmatic politicians, legal and constitutional scholars, and much of the general populace wearily deflated and dissipated. The war may not have been won, they reasoned, but at least the imminent threat had been sequestered behind the firewall of a renewed commitment to democracy.

However, even as life in America and throughout much of the world resumed some semblance of normalcy, and most people did their best to forget the absolute insanity they had endured and survived, others continued to eye the chastened yet resilient underbelly with nervous concern. The pervasive stagnation of much of the global economy, coupled with zealous resentment of "the elites" by so many among the masses, laid fears that the tamped-down ugliness of the recent past would remain dormant no longer.

Their fears were well founded. As the 2020s stumbled to their conclusion and then desolately surrendered to resurgent chaos across the American landscape, the dark forces mustered once more, culminating with the election of the Restore American Values and Greatness Party's first-ever presidential candidate, Ephraim Hollinger, to the nation's leadership in November 2032.

America had dodged the bullet of a full descent into darkness little more than a decade earlier; but now another round was in the chamber, and the hammer of hatred was cocked and on a hair trigger.

* * *

“Danny—are you ready to read?”

Daniel Jacobson’s eyes shifted upward from the homemade *Megillah* booklet as his head pivoted in the direction of his mother’s voice. While his father had been reading his own assigned portions, Daniel’s gaze had been meandering through the booklet’s text that contained selected excerpts from the Book of Esther. The lingering scent of freshly baked *hamantaschen*, the traditional Purim dessert treat, hung in the air, lulling Daniel into a near-hypnotic state as he lost himself in the Purim story. Daniel’s family read from this customized, abridged *Megillah* every year when they gathered for their Purim supper, in lieu of attending synagogue services to hear a full reading of the Book of Esther, as was customary for more observant families.

This particular Jacobson family tradition had begun long before Daniel had been born. As everyone in the family knew, Daniel’s great-grandfather, Nathan Jacobson, had commenced the ritual with his own parents and siblings almost ninety years earlier, shortly after returning home from the violent, climactic final year of the Second World War. Nathan had painstakingly hand-constructed that entire original set of homemade booklets during the early months of 1946: his self-prescribed therapy as he struggled to reenter civilian life. The effort and concentration that he put into each booklet helped Nathan cordon off a touch more of the war’s horrors he had endured and survived.

That first set of *Megillahs* had become nearly unusable through wear and tear after three decades, and was replaced in 1976 by an unremarkable mimeographed collection. Then, twenty years later, a third generation of booklets had been constructed via computer software and brought to life courtesy of Nathan Jacobson’s color laser printer. Nathan had recently retired from his state government job with Pennsylvania’s Department of Transportation, having reached the age of seventy, and now had plenty of time on his hands. He meticulously replicated the colorful intricacies from that first generation of booklets in the graphics software that he quickly mastered, restoring his original hand-drawn refinement to the family’s newest collection of *Megillahs*.

For almost forty years now, these were the booklets that were passed around the dining room table before each family Purim supper. Other than a few small tears here and there, not to mention minor food stains on most of them, the originals among these *Megillah* pamphlets were still as serviceable as they had been back in the 1990s, outlasting both generations of their predecessors. As the Jacobson family grew in size through births and marriages, additional copies were effortlessly printed and added to the collection. This year’s family Purim gathering was on the smaller side, but some years saw close to thirty people, with dining tables dispersed across two or even three rooms in whatever home was hosting that year.

Daniel’s eyes automatically shifted to his great-grandfather before realizing that, as his mother had just advised, they were all waiting on him to pick up the reading. Still, for a fraction of a second, his thoughts remained with Nathan Jacobson. Could this unbelievably old man have imagined, way back in 1946, that this far into the future he would still be alive, approaching his one hundred and seventh birthday in less than a week? That he would be sitting at the head of an oversized dining room table that now included two great-great-grandchildren among the family members? That both his overall health and mental faculties would remain more akin to those of a man twenty or even thirty years younger?

Daniel shook away the ponderings as he turned his attention to his *Megillah* reader, his eyes searching for the spot where he would pick up his assigned portion of the reading. It didn’t take him long to locate the correct place, but why should it? He had read the same four

paragraphs for close to twenty years now—no, make that *exactly* twenty years, Daniel realized, recalling that he had inherited this portion of the reading shortly after his bar mitzvah.

Here goes, Daniel thought, for the twenty-first time.

“Then were the king’s scribes called in the first month,” he began, “on the thirteenth day thereof, and there was written, according to all that...”

Daniel briefly paused, his eyes shifting up from his booklet to his nephew Noah and his niece Rachel, both sitting across the table, slightly off-angle from his own chair. He offered a quick nod so they knew what was coming, and then quickly resumed.

What was supposed to happen at this point was that upon Daniel mentioning the name “Haman”—the Purim story’s villain, essentially the Hitler or Himmler or Eichmann of his day—the children would enthusiastically whirl their *graggers*, the noisemakers traditionally used to drown out Haman’s name each time it was read from the text of the *Megillah*. The reader would pause for about ten seconds while the energetic clatter proceeded, and then resume reading the passage.

Tonight, though, ten-year-old Noah and eight-year-old Rachel Weber had quietly conspired to deliver a “special” Purim denouncement for the first encounter this evening with the hated name. The instant their Uncle Danny began to enunciate the name “Haman,” the children loudly interjected, in unison, “EPHRAIM HOLLINGER!” and then immediately began to twirl their *graggers* as they giggled with guilty delight at their Purim dinner table prank.

A good two or three seconds of surprised shock passed before Marc Weber, Daniel’s brother-in-law and the father of Noah and Rachel, suddenly bellowed “STOP IT! ENOUGH! BOTH OF YOU!”

Daniel was certain that his brother-in-law was about to explode: not even so much at his son’s and daughter’s prankish divergence from the centuries-old Purim tradition, but more in reaction to them replacing the name of the hated villain of the Queen Esther tale with that of Marc Weber’s own personal “Chosen One.”

Fortunately, the situation was diffused by Daniel’s sister Claire, who quickly clamped her right hand onto her husband’s left forearm in instant response to his overblown outburst. Claire’s glaring but wordless admonition did the trick (*Was she digging her nails into her husband’s forearm through his shirtsleeve?* Daniel wondered...), and nothing further was forthcoming from the man who, if anyone else present dared to ask, saw himself as the lone voice of sensibility among—and perhaps even an adversary of—his in-laws gathered around the Jacobsons’ dining room table.

“Go ahead,” Daniel’s great-grandfather calmly commanded, nodding toward the booklet in his great-grandson’s hand.

Daniel shot a quick, challenging look at his brother-in-law and then resumed his reading. He jumped back a few words but this time proceeded right over Haman’s name, rather than pause for another round of *gragger* noisemaking and a possible reprise of the children’s scheme.

“...according to all that Haman commanded, unto the king’s satraps, and to the governors that were over every province, and to the princes of every people; to every province according to the writing thereof, and to every people after their language; in the name of King Ahasuerus was it written, and it was sealed with the king’s ring.”

Daniel’s chest tightened as he moved ahead to the next verse. The sensation was a familiar one, and had been for twenty-one years now.

“And letters were sent by posts into all the king’s provinces, to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day...”

Daniel’s eyes and mouth joined forces to continue the assigned task of reading an additional two verses, even as his mind diverged to ponder unseen—yet very real—distant storm clouds, thinking to himself that the prank concocted by his nephew and niece certainly hadn’t materialized out of the proverbial thin air.

* * *

“Pop-pop?”

Nathan Jacobson’s eyes were open, yet Daniel knew that his great-grandfather’s mind hovered somewhere in the fuzzy-edged grayness between awake and asleep. The old man was slumped in a comfortably worn recliner that was perched on the enclosed back porch of his grandson Robert’s—Daniel’s father’s—gracefully aging home in the southern Pittsburgh suburbs. The early March evening had turned chilly, and the forecast called for light snow flurries sometime after midnight. However, the temperature on the enclosed porch with its removable thick glass windows still in place more closely matched that of inside the house, and was the absolute perfect setting for anyone, especially someone of Nathan Jacobson’s age, to drift off into a comfortable after-dinner nap. The doughy-sweet *hamantaschen* aroma had made its way to—and was now pleasantly trapped inside—the enclosed porch, bringing a slight growl of hunger to Daniel’s stomach even though he was still full from dinner.

“Pop-pop?” Daniel tried again after a few seconds.

From the moment the first of Nathan’s nine great-grandchildren had been born, he had been awarded the name “Pop-pop” for this newest generation of his descendants. Nathan had always been “Grandpa” to his five grandchildren, but everyone was in agreement that “Great-Grandpa” or a similar moniker sounded awkward. So he became “Pop-pop” not only to his first great-grandchild—Daniel’s older sister Claire—but to all the others that followed. That term continued even into the next generation when Noah and Rachel joined the family. Who knew: If the old man could keep going for another dozen years—and perhaps old Nathan could actually pull off that feat, with a little help from modern medicine—then he could even have great-great-*great*-grandchildren likewise addressing him as “Pop-pop.” Certainly nobody gave it any thought thirty-five years earlier when Claire was born, but they had fortuitously settled on a timeless, multi-generation family moniker for their ancient patriarch.

This time, the light of awareness slowly radiated from the old man’s eyes. His gaze shifted imperceptibly to lock with Daniel. Without his glasses, the image before his face was fuzzily unfocused, yet he knew who was addressing him.

“Danny,” the old man croaked. Whereas Daniel Jacobson preferred his given name in a professional setting, everyone in his family had called him “Danny” since he had been a boy.

“How are you feeling, Pop-pop?” Daniel decided to inquire before broaching the idea that was on his mind.

Nathan slightly shuffled his body in the recliner, a seated stretch to relax the stiffness that inevitably settled into his century-old muscles whenever he sat still for more than a few minutes. He instinctively reached to his left, feeling around the end table for his glasses. Easily finding them, he raised them to his face with a slightly quivering left hand but was still able to slip on the trifocals without poking himself with either of the temples.

Nathan didn't respond to his great-grandson's "how are you feeling" question. Perhaps he didn't think it worth the effort to enumerate a handful of minor aches and pains; or perhaps the old man already forgot that Daniel had asked the question. Nathan's faculties remained sharp for the most part, but his mind tended to dull as each day neared its conclusion. Instead, his newly focused eyes locked with Daniel's.

"A little bit of excitement during supper, huh?"

Daniel nervously looked around to see if perhaps his brother-in-law had wandered from inside the house to the porch or the doorway, and was now within earshot. The prankish moment had slid past as the selected *Megillah* readings proceeded around the table to their conclusion, followed by a more or less traditional Purim dinner. "More or less" because about half of those present in Daniel's parents' home this evening were either vegan or vegetarian, so generational Jewish dishes such as beef brisket and roasted chicken were supplemented with platters of meatless alternatives. (However, even most of the family members who habitually shunned dairy and eggs made an exception for the family's prized *hamantaschen* recipe that dated back more than a century.) Marc Weber had, fortunately, decided to sidestep the opportunity to parrot some choice Ephraim Hollinger propaganda during the dinner and dessert conversations, and apparently the Jacobson family would make it through the rest of the evening without any verbal clashes. Maybe Marc felt outnumbered around the table; but whatever the reason, the rest of dinner had been calm.

Daniel and his great-grandfather were still the only ones on the back porch. *Good*, Daniel thought, *no chance Marc heard Pop-pop, because then he would almost certainly use that slight statement as an opening for his undoubtedly pent-up recitation of the latest "Here's how President Hollinger will restore America's values and greatness" bullshit.*

"Yeah," Daniel nodded, then deliberately shifted his great-grandfather's attention in a different direction.

"Pop-pop, you remember that I'm a history professor, right?"

The sight of a man who was a tad bit short of his one-hundred-seventh birthday rolling his eyes in exasperation was a fascinating one.

"I'm old, Danny; not senile. Of course I remember that you're a history professor."

Sufficiently chastened at his impertinent opening, Daniel hurried an apology.

"Sorry, Pop-pop," he replied, his tight smile tinged with embarrassment. "I was just making sure."

Nathan Jacobson simply raised his eyebrows in a "go on; proceed" facial gesture.

"Well," Daniel continued, "you remember that article I wrote last fall? About you now being the last American soldier alive who fought in Europe during World War II?"

My God! Daniel thought to himself as he processed the sound of his own words. *That sounds so harsh when I just say it like that!*

"There's a history professor at West Point," Daniel continued after his great-grandfather nodded that indeed he remembered being the subject of the mentioned article, "who would like to interview you for an article that she's writing."

Daniel braced himself for what he was about to say next.

“It’s about you being the final American soldier alive who liberated Dachau.”

* * *

Corporal Nathan Jacobson’s presence was injected into the Second World War in mid-August 1944, when he hit the beach in Southern France as part of *Operation Dragoon*. The much more renowned massive assault on Northern France known as *Operation Overlord*—the famed D-Day invasion—had taken place two months earlier in Normandy, and the Allied strategy called for this second set of landings to tighten the vise around the retreating Nazi forces.

Nathan Jacobson had been only eighteen years old back then, green to the horrors of combat. By the time his 45th Infantry Division arrived at the gates of the Dachau concentration camp the following April, however, he felt much the same as the unit’s old-timers who had landed in Anzio and fought their way across Italy earlier in that terrible year of ’44, before being redeployed to stage for *Dragoon*. That was the point at which Nathan arrived as one of numerous replacements to train for the upcoming invasion alongside what was left of the division veterans.

For years, Nathan refused to talk about what he had witnessed as the 45th liberated Dachau, and then during the aftermath. Crossing the Atlantic on the *Liberty* ship back from Europe several months later after the A-bombs ended the war, Nathan did his best to push aside the visions—some tragically genuine, others horrifically conjured—that had haunted every single night’s attempt at sleep. Still, the sights and sounds and smells remained with him to this very day, periodically forcing their way into his conscious memory to instantaneously snatch Nathan Jacobson against his will back to the horrors of the war.

Most of the 45th made it back to New York by September before being sent to Camp Bowie in Texas. On the fourth anniversary of Pearl Harbor, the Army’s 45th Infantry Division was deactivated. By that time Nathan had just enough points to receive his discharge, instead of being transferred to another unit. Hanukah had occurred at the beginning of December that year, and even the eighth and final day was now weeks in the past; but when Nathan’s train pulled into Pittsburgh’s Penn Station late that Christmas Eve afternoon, his family turned that holiday into a second Hanukah in joyous celebration of their son’s safe return from the war.

* * *

That night, after returning home to his condo in the Oakland section of Pittsburgh, Daniel Jacobson contemplated what had transpired earlier that evening. He was still deeply troubled by his brother-in-law’s brief outburst in response to Noah’s and Rachel’s mischief...some very creative mischief, Daniel still couldn’t help thinking.

Daniel found his thoughts attempting to latch on to those of his sister Claire: to try and get inside her head. Daniel knew his sister well enough to be absolutely certain that she was exasperated by Marc Weber’s fascination with and slavish devotion to Ephraim Hollinger. Daniel’s brother-in-law had always voted his wallet; Marc made that clear to everyone. For a relatively young man, Marc had done extremely well in the rough-and-tumble commercial construction business, grabbing an outsized share of gleaming suburban office parks and urban gentrification projects when America’s ever-cyclical real estate fortunes metered back over to the “booming” side once again in the mid-2020s.

While a casual observer might instantly presume jealousy and resentment were in play here, Daniel truly had nothing against his brother-in-law when it came to the man’s fortunes and successes. Daniel had absolutely no interest in the sometimes-murky world of

construction, or most anything else from the world of commerce and business. He was perfectly content having followed his passion for history into a career in academia. Daniel lived modestly, with little need for the entrapments of wealth that seemed every bit as much a part of Marc Weber as the man's skin. *So be it*, Daniel had calmly told himself numerous times whenever the tiniest scrap of envy attempted to worm its way into his psyche. *I may not be wealthy—at least not right now, and probably I never will be—but I'm content*; that was Associate Professor Daniel Jacobson's mantra.

Nor did he begrudge his sister's entrée into a gilded lifestyle that was so far removed from how they both had grown up. Robert Jacobson—Daniel's and Claire's father—was a reasonably successful computer technology consultant, but one who had spent his entire career doing routine, moderate-compensation projects for companies in the Pittsburgh area, rather than living on the road and fanatically clawing his way up the ranks of one of the big-time global consultancies. Their father had made a comfortable living, and still did; but even in his best years he fell far short of the big bucks that he might have made had he meandered onto a different, far more aggressive—and consuming—career path.

When Claire first married Marc Weber eleven years earlier, she had been a struggling schoolteacher, living in a small studio apartment only several blocks from where Daniel now lived. Marc had been a realtor then, riding the waves of Pittsburgh's residential real estate market that gyrated between bursts of frenzied buying and selling versus, on the other side, occasional sluggish periods hallmarked by stagnant home values and relatively few transactions. Unlike his wife, though, Marc Weber was hardly content with the prospect of lifelong membership in the middle class. Initially he made some profitable forays into house flipping, doing much of the refurbishment himself. Soon he began moonlighting with a commercial construction firm and quickly learned the ropes. By 2026 he had set up shop on his own, and within two years was clearing about five million a year.

Claire had easily glided into this new world of wealth and privilege, but she had also confided in her brother several times over the years that she wasn't particularly thrilled with the accompanying changes in her husband's philosophical DNA. Like Claire and Daniel, Marc had grown up in a middle-class Jewish home that leaned slightly left of center when it came to politics and society. Now, though, Marc Weber was immutably encased in an indestructible shell of "Business Über Alles" doctrine, zealously railing against "THE LIBERALS AND SOCIALISTS WHO WON'T BE HAPPY UNTIL THEY'VE DESTROYED OUR COUNTRY!" in a manner one would never expect to hear from someone who had grown up as Marc Weber had.

For a while, Daniel presumed that his sister had likewise drifted over to the Dark Side, especially after Ephraim Hollinger leeching onto the Restore American Values and Greatness Party that had been birthed by the final, irreparable fracture of the Republican Party just before the 2030 midterm elections. Marc Weber had quickly and gleefully embraced the RAVGs, carefully maneuvering himself to land on the radar of the new party's moneyed power brokers.

Claire, however, had tipsily confided in her brother one night in the spring of '31, the two of them sitting alone in the very spot on their parents' back porch where Daniel had spoken earlier this evening with Pop-pop, that she was increasingly appalled at her husband's nascent zest for the RAVG Party, apparently choosing to ignore its openly nationalist and racist doctrine. Claire wasn't sufficiently appalled, though, she confessed to her brother when he pressed the subject, to do something severely drastic in response...such as threaten to leave if he didn't back away from his flirtation with the dark forces. At least Marc wasn't echoing the Hollinger and RAVG Party invectives against "the globalist Jews who have ruined this once-great country," she rationalized, even though her husband regularly railed against

“caravans of immigrants” and “socialist Dems who are all about seizing and redistributing wealth” and the rest of the standard lineup of designated threats.

Still, Claire was, as the eye-rolling saying went, “disappointed, troubled and concerned” about this jolting rerouting onto an ominous side road detour, destination unknown for now, that her husband’s politics had taken.

Daniel sighed as he retrieved an open bottle of cabernet from his refrigerator and poured himself a modest-sized nightcap. He energetically swirled the stemless wineglass, not so much for purposes of oxygenation but rather to warm the wine to a more suitable drinking temperature for a red. Claire was thirty-five; she was a grown woman. If she chose to roll her eyes and tut-tut behind her husband’s back—but nothing more than that—then that was her choice. In fact, Daniel found himself smiling to himself as he took a test sip of the cab to see if it had sufficiently warmed, the prank by his niece and nephew gave him hope that Claire had successfully insulated her children at least a little bit from their father’s troubling embrace of America’s latest flirtation with autocracy and nationalism. Plus her swift “knock it off” silent admonishment to Marc also indicated that while she may put up with his ranting agitprop at home or in private, self-justifying whatever Marc did and thought in pursuit of construction work and other side deals because that’s where the money was found, she had at least drawn the proverbial line when it came to his soapboxing and grandstanding in front of her family.

Satisfied that the chill had mostly dissipated from his wine, Daniel crossed over into the living room that adjoined his condo’s kitchen. He plopped himself into a tan recliner that was almost identical to the one in which his great-grandfather had snoozed after the family’s Purim dinner earlier this evening. The master control for the living room lighting was set to “late evening,” with the room halfway illuminated to help transition Daniel toward the eventual darkness of his bedroom.

Daniel’s thoughts instantly floated to Pop-pop; actually, to the email he had received yesterday from Major Michele Burgess, the West Point history professor Daniel had mentioned in passing to his great-grandfather. What Daniel had neglected to tell Pop-pop, though, was the specific reason that Major Burgess contacted Daniel about Nathan Jacobson.

Just as Nathan Jacobson was the final surviving American soldier who had liberated Dachau, this Major Burgess’ great-grandfather, Isaac Gretz, was believed to be the final surviving prisoner of that sickening concentration camp. The Nazis had been meticulous record-keepers about their Holocaust crimes; but that paradoxical, fanatic insistence on documenting the names of their victims and the details of their crimes of humanity had been overtaken during those final chaotic months of the war.

Quite possibly, then, a few other Dachau survivors might still be alive out there somewhere, especially when one considered that “Dachau” had multiple meanings. The main camp of Dachau where Isaac Gretz had been imprisoned eventually grew into the epicenter of a network consisting of more than thirty large satellite camps and sub-camps under its control, along with hundreds of smaller ones. Over the years, the harsh, dreaded name had been used interchangeably for the original concentration camp as well as the overall expansive network of horror.

But absent any contradictory evidence and following the deaths last month of two other known survivors, Isaac Gretz was now recognized as the final living connection to the main camp at least, and perhaps the entire Dachau network.

Major Burgess (*or would it be Professor Burgess, since she’s a history professor, her Army rank notwithstanding? I’ll have to ask her which she prefers*, Daniel thought) had the idea of uniting their respective great-grandfathers—or possibly reuniting them, if the two had perhaps crossed

paths during that distant past spring of 1945—and documenting the solemn occasion of those two final survivors meeting eighty-eight years later. Personal memories of the Holocaust were now all but extinguished, and even the generation that followed that of the survivors and the liberators was rapidly diminishing. What Major Burgess was proposing was a final gift to history: a concluding firsthand bequest to the credo of “Never Forget.”

Daniel slowly shook his head, his thoughts taking flight to snippets of a possible meeting sometime in the near future between the two old men. He tried unsuccessfully to put himself in Pop-pop’s place. He could easily visualize the proposed encounter, but fell woefully short in his attempt to summon the emotions and sensations that would, no doubt, overcome Nathan Jacobson as he came face-to-face with the final Dachau survivor.

A stomach-churning chill suddenly enveloped Daniel, and he spent the next twenty minutes, off and on as he half-watched a rerun on TV, trying to wrap his thoughts around the reason for that sudden reaction. It was more than just the conjured vision of the two old men coming together; of that, Daniel was certain. He was almost finished with his nightcap glass of wine when clarity suddenly smacked him, causing an instant reprise of the same sense of dread.

Imagine that you were this Major Burgess’ great-grandfather, Daniel contemplated, meeting one of the men who had liberated you from hell on earth...the *final* one of those rescuing liberators left alive. On April 29, 1945, you no doubt would have believed that your nightmare was suddenly, miraculously, finally over. Nathan Jacobson, now a buck sergeant after eight and a half months of combat, would likewise have thought the same. Total victory in Europe was just around the corner; the Nazis were finished, and the evil they had set loose on the world would soon be shoved back to the depths of hell.

Could either of these men have imagined that not only would they be alive almost ninety years later, but that they might actually come together as that very same evil bubbled far too close to the surface, threatening to be unleashed once more?

Chapter 2

“The *extremely* powerful forces who control this once-great nation’s media industries are mustering every weapon they can to prevent President Hollinger and the right-minded thinkers in Congress from implementing the Truth and Accuracy in Media and Communications Act!” Toni Fowler all but screamed at the American Values and Greatness Network’s broadcast camera.

“It’s up to all of *us* here at AVGN,” she crooked her left index finger toward her carefully wardrobe, spray-tanned cleavage, “and it’s up to all of *you* loyal American patriots”—she quickly flicked that same finger directly at the camera lens—“to make *certain* that doesn’t happen!”

The cameraman signaled to the AVGN star “news” anchor that they had just cut to a commercial. Toni Fowler sighed as she slumped back in her chair. Her eyes darted upward to the wall clock opposite her, behind and above the camera. Only fifteen minutes left: whew! When Toni’s immense popularity resulted in AVGN doubling the duration of her previously half-hour program, her already outsized salary had likewise doubled. But wow! Summoning and maintaining the level of righteous indignation that her audience loved and expected for an entire hour was damn hard work!

If anyone could rise to the occasion, though, Toni Fowler—given name Janice Bailey—could always be counted on, five nights a week. When the American Values and Greatness Network was born out of that seismic upheaval in right-wing cable networks back in 2027, Toni was the star that Bob Platte, AVGN’s power broker and programming puppet master, coveted above all others for the “hot blonde anchor” slot in his new all-star lineup. Bob Platte had been the one, in fact, who had originally hired Janice Bailey at one of those now-defunct networks and had renamed her Toni-with-an-i Fowler before wedging her into their programming. While “Janice Bailey” was far too nondescript of a name for a right-wing media star, the woman herself was straight out of central casting, as a certain former president would frequently praise someone whom he had personally selected for his entourage.

Platte’s new star had been in her late twenties then: a statuesque five-nine, with a sculpted body that never failed to pivot heads. The perfectly cut blonde hair that fell below her shoulders and her stunning, precisely made-up face completed the picture. Her on-air facial gestures were perfectly fashioned at will. Toni Fowler could effortlessly gyrate between virtuous hatred for those who were steadfastly determined to ruin this nation and its culture, and seemingly genuine empathy for the plights of her loyal viewers, the Silent Majority, who suffered at the hands of those enemies. All she needed to complete the package was the right name, which Bob Platte supplied.

Toni Fowler’s program followed the same inviolate formula as the rest of AVGN’s hour-long broadcasts, each of which had outgrown its original half-hour format as the network soon blew past even the most wildly optimistic market share forecasts. She would begin each night with a cold open, consisting of exactly ten seconds of some precisely worded “We loyal American patriots are all under attack!” affront. Each day’s portfolio of umbrages for the evening lineup was finalized during that morning’s programming meeting that Toni and the rest of AVGN’s evening anchors and producers attended. By that meeting’s conclusion, their

individual programs—each with its own distinctive angle and personality—had been orchestrated into a finely tuned, four-hour procession of aggrieved resentment for that evening’s prime-time block.

After her short opening came fifteen seconds of slick graphics, swelling martial-slash-patriotic music, and a narrated voice-over intro, all choreographed to prepare the evening’s battlefield, as the saying went. For the next ten minutes, Toni would expound on her topical overture through her regular concoction of pseudo-facts, questionable statistics, and unsubstantiated conclusions, swirled inside a wrapper of aggrieved wrath.

Exactly three minutes and fifteen seconds of commercials followed, and when Toni returned she would repeat the same formula, this time shifting to whatever the lead topic had been on Hayden Lafferty’s (real name John Wilson) program during the preceding hour. Right-wing opinion programming had long ago discovered the sustaining power of reinforcing selected messaging at just the right intervals across multiple programs, and AVGN’s sophisticated usage of data and analytics honed that practice into an art form.

A solid six minutes of commercials aired at the bottom of the hour, but AVGN’s market research accurately reported that Toni Fowler’s audience wasn’t going anywhere. Well, perhaps to the restroom or the refrigerator, but AVGN knew that they would hurry back and remain glued to their television sets.

Toni’s shtick coming back from the bottom-of-the-hour break was to open the second half of her program with some sort of urgent “This Just In!” loopback to whatever it was that she had shouted about during her opening. Sometimes she would unashamedly fabricate a quote from a sacrificial antagonist in the “lamestream media” or the “DemonRat” Party, while other times one of those designated Enemies of the State would actually oblige her with a genuine soundbite or two that she could twist to instill fresh rage in her viewers.

The last fifteen minutes of her program—and that’s where she was right now—would ping-pong between three-minute blocks of sharing social media invectives submitted by her loyal viewers with patronizing commentary appended to each one, and equal-duration sets of yet more commercials. Toni Fowler had a sweet deal: Any company that wanted to land a coveted advertising slot on her program not only had to shell out top rates, but also had to kick over a percentage of their sales that came from those slots. Bob Platte made sure that not only did the network get its taste, his talent did as well. After all, a near-foolproof way to keep Toni Fowler and Hayden Lafferty and Keenan Lucas and Tristan Wyatt ensconced at the American Values and Greatness Network was to make sure each was perpetually neck-deep in cash, whether or not any of them actually bought into the toxic sewage they spewed night after night.

AVGN’s overarching theme and resultant messaging had remained constant since its founding, with one big difference. Ever since Ephraim Hollinger’s razor-thin election last November, AVGN had pivoted from incessantly pounding the previous administration and Congress in an attempt to drive from power both Democrats and those who had rebuilt the traditional conservatism of the Republican Party. Bob Platte, in fact, had been one of the behind-the-scenes architects of the new Restore American Values and Greatness Party, and embraced the furtive synergies between the two. “AVGN is interchangeable with RAVG,” he regularly advised at staff meetings and power lunches and quiet deal-making encounters conducted in luxury airport lounges and the most exclusive private clubs.

Now, with Hollinger in the White House and more than a third each of the Senate and the House controlled by the RAVG Party, the network’s messaging largely shifted to the theme that Toni Fowler had kicked off with tonight. That old bogeyman, the contemptible and

disloyal Deep State, had been resurrected. A cabal consisting of traditional media, self-serving opposition politicians, disloyal “globalists,” career civil servants interested only in lifetime employment while doing as little work as possible, and shadowy international moneyed interests were all conspiring to “take down” Ephraim Hollinger. (“Use the phrase ‘take down’ at least three times tonight!” Bob Platte would pointedly remind his anchors, producers, and scriptwriters every morning in their programming meeting.) AVGN’s warning to its loyal audience that comprised the majority of Ephraim Hollinger’s base was simple and unvarying: “They’re coming after YOU!”

After Hollinger’s election, rumors had spread that he would tap Toni Fowler and her charismatic appeal to Hollinger’s followers for some role in his administration: most likely White House Press Secretary, or perhaps Communications Director. In fact, Hollinger’s minions had reached out to Toni right around Thanksgiving with a “name your job” blanket offer.

The whole “center of power” aura that came with being part of President Hollinger’s inner circle was a formidable lure. But why in the world would she surrender her eight-figure annual comp package for government wages, even at Executive Schedule-level pay? Bart Lawrence, Hollinger’s bagman who was among those presenting the offer to her, hinted that if she came on board “we can come up with ways to make you whole.” Still, Toni spent less than fifteen seconds considering the offer before declining.

Then again: Why would it have to be an either-or? If Bob Platte’s ultimate designs came to fruition—and there was no reason to think that they wouldn’t, later if not sooner—Toni Fowler might eventually have her cake and eat it, too.

Chapter 3

“He lives in a nursing home in Youngstown, Ohio,” Michele Burgess told Daniel Jacobson, referring to Isaac Gretz, her great-grandfather. “That’s only about an hour from Pittsburgh, right?”

“Correct,” Daniel acknowledged.

“But I think even an hour’s drive will be too hard on him,” Michele interjected before Daniel could reply further. “He’s been pretty frail for the past year or so.”

“My Pop-p...I mean my great-grandfather should be able to make that drive,” Daniel offered. “So we can meet you and him there.”

“Are you sure?” The Army major’s concern seemed genuine, and this time Daniel took a moment to contemplate the exercise and its possible pitfalls, rather than instantly volunteer Nathan Jacobson for his first moderate-distance round trip in...well, since before he turned one hundred, Daniel was certain.

“I think he’ll be okay,” Daniel finally responded, “but I’ll definitely make sure that he’s feeling well enough for the trip. He’s pretty hearty for someone of his age. Other than a triple bypass about thirty years ago, I don’t know that he’s ever really been sick since he had a bad case of frostbite during the war.”

Daniel watched his right hand quickly, reflexively form a fist and tap out three light knocks on his wooden office desk, as if his hand had a mind of its own. *No way am I going to let your mouth jinx Pop-pop!* the hand seemed to be silently admonishing Daniel.

“How does next Sunday look? The twentieth? Late morning or early afternoon?” Major Burgess suggested.

Daniel shook his head as he replied, even though he was alone in his small, windowless office at Western Pennsylvania College and this conversation was taking place via the college’s antiquated audio-only phone system. His office was especially stuffy today, even with the door open. As soon as he was done with this call, he would phone over to the campus facilities management and see if they could do something about the staleness that permeated the building and interrupted his concentration.

Daniel forced his attention back to his phone call.

“That won’t work; that’s actually his birthday,” he continued. “We’re having a big family get-together for him.”

“No problem,” Michele quickly replied. “In fact, that following week is when West Point has spring break, so I wouldn’t have any trouble—”

“Same for us,” Daniel interrupted. “We have spring break that exact same week. How would either Tuesday or Wednesday be for you? I think that’s...”

Daniel’s eyes shifted to the *World War II History* calendar thumbtacked on the wall to the right side of his desk. His eyes instinctively landed on a photo of George Patton that adorned the top half of the March calendar, commemorating exactly ninety years’ passage since the titanic clashes across North Africa during World War II. His gaze quickly shifted downward to the gridded calendar portion.

“...twenty-second or twenty-third.”

“Let’s go with Tuesday,” Michele concurred. “I don’t have to be back at West Point until Sunday night, so this way I can stay in Youngstown for a few days to visit.”

Daniel flicked his laptop over to the calendar app and hovered the mouse above Tuesday, March 22nd.

“You were saying for that Tuesday, either late morning or early afternoon —”

This time it was Major Burgess’ turn to interrupt.

“How about eleven?”

A few clicks on his laptop and Daniel had made the calendar entry.

“What exactly do you have in mind when they get together?” he asked, still uncertain exactly what this West Point history professor was seeking.

A sigh came over the phone connection.

“To be honest,” she confessed, “I’m not exactly certain. I guess it’s possible that neither one of them will want to even talk about what happened that day...you know, the actual liberation itself, or the aftermath. You know what happened, right? The revenge killings?”

Daniel’s throat tightened as horrific conjured images of the revenge killings of S.S. guards by American soldiers and newly liberated prisoners alike translucently flashed across his field of vision.

“Uh-huh,” he replied quietly, and then realized a nagging question was pricking at him.

“What does your great-grandfather think? About meeting mine?” For all Daniel knew, this Michele Burgess’ great-grandfather wanted no part of dredging up whatever horrifying memories he had been able to suppress over the years. Even if the two old men did nothing but reminisce about...well, about *anything* other than the war in general and Dachau in particular, Daniel was certain that this encounter couldn’t help but surface remembrances that were better left deeply buried.

“It’s difficult to describe,” was Major Burgess’ hesitant reply. “Have you ever seen videos from any of those final gatherings of a particular group of World War II veterans? Like the Doolittle Raiders or the Tuskegee Airmen, or the Navajo Code Talkers?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I think he would like the...I guess closure,” Michele mused. “Not just for his own sake, but maybe the idea of my documenting it for others to see in the future. You know, ‘Never forget’?”

“I can see that,” Daniel nodded. “My Pop-p...I mean my great-grand—”

“It’s okay, you can call him your Pop-pop,” Michele Burgess interrupted. Even though they were on a voice-only line, Daniel was certain that this West Point history professor was smiling as she acknowledged the stubborn pervasiveness of Nathan Jacobson’s familial nickname.

“Okay,” Daniel grinned back. “Anyway, my Pop-pop feels the same way; at least I think so. He wouldn’t really say too much when I asked him; you know...”

“Yeah, I know,” Major Burgess indicated that she understood.

“I’ll send you the nursing home’s address,” she changed the subject back to the forthcoming meeting. “And between now and then, I’ll think of some specific ideas for how

exactly the...I don't know, I guess we can call it a meeting...anyway, how it might proceed and how we can document it."

"Sounds good," Daniel replied. "Let me know if you need anything from me, or want to run anything by me before then."

"I will."

Daniel was just about to say goodbye and hang up when Michele Burgess asked:

"One other thing: Do you know if there are going to be any new faculty slots in your history department there for next fall? I'm done teaching at West Point after the end of this semester."

For a few seconds, Daniel didn't respond as his mind churned through the surprise question.

"Um...yeah, two new positions," he finally answered.

"I don't have a PhD though," Major Burgess quickly added. "At West Point, you can teach with a master's degree; you don't have to have a doctorate."

"We have some non-PhD faculty here also," Daniel responded. "In fact, one of the open slots is non-tenure track and can be for either a PhD or a master's-level lecturer."

"Would you be okay if I sent you my CV to look over and, if you're okay with it, submit it for that position?"

"Uh...sure," Daniel hesitated slightly. "But isn't the Army sending you somewhere else after your assignment at West Point is up?"

Invisible but detectable bitterness traversed the phone connection a fraction of a second ahead of Michele Burgess' voice. Daniel was suddenly certain of what she was about to say even before she uttered the defiant words.

"There's no way I'm staying in the Army and serving under *him*."

Chapter 4

June 6, 1984.

Not a morning passed that Ephraim Hollinger didn't pause and deliberately force himself to relive the nightmarish memories and wretched sensations of that day. This mental self-flagellation had shaped every action Hollinger had taken during the near half-century that had passed, and its legacy would live on long past the moment when he eventually parted company with life itself.

Most of the country's attention throughout that day was focused on Ronald Reagan's moving speech at Pointe du Hoc, in Normandy, commemorating the fortieth anniversary of the famed D-Day invasion. Reagan's speech had been precisely scheduled and timed by his advisors to be broadcast live on the morning news programs and drive-time AM radio stations back in the States, and many of those who watched or listened to the president that Wednesday morning reflected on his words throughout the day. The evening network news programs rebroadcast film and video of that morning's ceremony, highlighting Reagan's speech. The afternoon and evening newspapers that were still in print by then, even those that were typically critical of Reagan and his policies, mostly praised the president's demeanor and stirring words of remembrance from that very morning.

The commemoration in northern France and its reception here in the United States didn't come close to resonating with Josiah Hollinger or anyone else in his family, including eight-year-old Ephraim. That was the same morning that the two Jew bankers from Philadelphia arrived at Josiah's farm outside of Nuremberg, Pennsylvania, to serve him with a final notice of eviction. Three state troopers came along this time to ensure that Josiah complied with the order, unlike the previous two times Josiah had been served.

The farm crisis of the early 1980s ravaged much of the Midwest's family farms, and the troubles rippled across Ohio into Pennsylvania farm country as well. So many family farms had barely scraped by during the late '70s and early '80s when inflation and interest rates skyrocketed. The brief but brutal recession early in Reagan's first term finally tamed inflation and brought the sky-high interest rates back to earth; but the resultant severe oversupply of farm commodities, along with a significant drop in the country's agricultural exports, drove the nails into the coffins of far too many smallish farms. The big-city bankers who owned the paper called their unpaid debts and then callously arrived to steal away land, outbuildings, and farmhouses that had been owned for generations by hardworking families—that's how farmers and laborers like Josiah Hollinger saw the pitiless wave of foreclosure mercilessly rumbling toward them.

Josiah's original farm loans had been with the local agricultural bank, but one of the large Philadelphia banks had bought all of that much smaller institution's farm loans back in early 1982. These same two Jewish Yuppies who showed up on his doorstep that morning—Silver and Marcuson were their names, Ephraim would always remember—had been the ones who had contacted Josiah in the spring of '82 and convinced him to borrow an extra hundred thousand to put up a new pole barn, buy a new combine, and use the rest for a down payment on the adjoining eighty acres that had just been listed for sale. They had suckered him in, and good; and now, only two years later, they had his farm.

A sympathetic county sheriff had delivered the first two eviction notices, sitting in the Hollinger kitchen each time to commiserate with what was happening to this country, even as Reagan was setting it on a proper path once again. But the most that the sheriff could do was stall for time. “The Jews will come for their money,” the sheriff morosely warned Josiah Hollinger—and his son, seated to Josiah’s right at the kitchen table during that second visit—to expect the inevitable.

Josiah Hollinger moved his wife and three children—Ephraim, his older sister, and younger brother—an hour and a half southeast, taking a job in one of the Bethlehem area steel mills still clinging to life. Billy Joel had voiced the region’s lament several years earlier in his hit song, but the singer’s biting commentary of the then-present contrasted with bittersweet remembrances of yesteryear had only been a warm-up act. By 1984 the steel industry’s troubles mirrored those of the American farmer from just several years earlier, ravaging entire communities where Big Steel had reigned for decades. Cities from Gary, Indiana, to Youngstown, Ohio, and then eastward through Pittsburgh and across Pennsylvania to the Jersey border, were all shellacked. Josiah’s job lasted less than five months before he was pink-slipped.

Josiah Hollinger wound up taking a custodial job in nearby Allentown, as did his wife Emma. The Hollinger family limped along, even as they watched the Jews on Wall Street make a killing in the furious bull market of the mid-1980s. Josiah raged almost every night at the family’s dinner table how “those people” sat in their offices high above Manhattan, making piles of money off the hard work of regular Americans such as the Hollingers. Even worse: Many of them pooled gigantic sums of money from their fellow Jews to use for hostile takeovers of long-standing American companies that they would then break up and sell off, pocketing millions or even billions along the way. “Arbitrage” was what the game was called, but Josiah Hollinger easily recognized a more sophisticated form of their habitual thievery.

The *coup de grâce* came just before the stock market crashed in ’87 when the insider trading scandals broke. Apparently, a lot of the Jews weren’t satisfied with their haul from the latest incarnations of their centuries-old tradition of scheming moneylending. Greedier than ever, the narrative went, they resorted to blatantly illegal manipulation and self-dealing in an attempt to corner even more of America’s wealth for themselves.

Ephraim Hollinger grew up on a steady diet of this dinner-table bile, along with his father’s regular plea to Ephraim and his siblings to somehow, someday, avenge the Hollinger family’s plight:

“Never forget what they did to us.”

* * *

Only days after turning twenty, Ephraim Hollinger dropped out of community college and scraped together just enough money to lease three midsized delivery trucks. The American economy was once again booming by 1996: not just in technology and finance, but also in manufacturing and physical goods that one could actually touch; goods that needed to be transported from one place to another. The swelling budget deficits of the 1980s and early 1990s were rapidly shrinking away, and within two years the nation would actually be sitting on budget surpluses. The aftermath of 9/11 would soon send the country’s financial health on another downward spiral; but for the time being, the sun shone brightly on America.

Ephraim Hollinger continued to rapidly expand Hollinger Industries into a formidable nationwide trucking company. He had deliberately chosen that open-ended company name to serve as an umbrella for...well, for wherever he would be able to take his company as the years went by.

Nationwide trucking eventually expanded into global shipping and a fleet of private cargo planes, and by the mid-2010s Ephraim Hollinger was worth close to a half billion dollars. His grim determination to avenge the indignities inflicted on his family so long ago burned as fiercely as ever. If only Josiah and Emma Hollinger had lived to see what their son had been able to accomplish; that was Ephraim's only real regret. Years of bitterness had taken their toll on Josiah as well as his wife, and both had passed away in the very early 2000s, when Hollinger Industries was but a fraction of the size it eventually achieved.

Politics and commerce go hand in hand for so many, and Ephraim Hollinger was no exception. His wealth bought him access and influence. He became a commanding yet stealthy power broker in the growing world of far-right politics. Hollinger funded political campaigns and shadowy white nationalist groups alike. For a time, Ephraim Hollinger's public face as a successful industrialist and his private world of carefully deploying his "investments" remained firewalled apart.

The resurgent mainstreaming of what once would have been accurately termed the "lunatic fringe" changed everything. Funded by dark money from Ephraim Hollinger and other like-minded wealthy individuals and families, and buoyed by a new wave of sweeping, unshackled racism and xenophobic nationalism that hallmarked "the base," a sizeable segment of the American public gleefully mainlined and then vomited back a steady diet of unrepentant hatred. "America" had always been a fragile experiment. The melting pot had come into existence already in a state of advanced corrosion, and was all but destined to eventually rust out.

Then what?

* * *

The history of the Republican Party was almost always hallmarked by opposing factions, the same as the Democratic Party. Those factions had, on occasion, spawned offshoot third-party presidential candidates. Long ago, in 1872, Horace Greeley, under the banner of the new Liberal Republican Party, split from the traditional Republican Party to oppose Ulysses Grant's bid for a second term. Then, forty years later, former President Teddy Roosevelt tried for a political comeback within the party; but after losing the Republican nomination, he created and then ran as the candidate of the briefly existing Progressive Party. Other Republican politicians, such as John Anderson in 1980, would periodically run for the presidency as independents or standard-bearers of some minor political party.

The rupture of the Republican Party in the summer of 2030 eclipsed every previous rift. During the latter years of the twenties, what many termed the "traditional Republican Party" valiantly and astonishingly clawed its way back from the verge of extinction to seize control of the party leadership and doctrine, thanks to a perfect storm that slammed and then capsized the forces that had hijacked the party a decade earlier.

Conservative causes had become the veneer astride a money machine cesspool for the ages. Legions of new grifters wanted in on the act, but they realized that only so many dollars were there for the taking from the true believers and the gullible alike. No problem—all they had to do was squeeze out the current slate of grifters by discrediting "legacy" doctrine and promoting some new spin, and triggering a little character assassination here and there against the current superstars of the right. The true right feuded with the alt-right, and they both feuded with the nationalist right and also the principled right, as well as new entrants who were slippery enough not to be labeled or pinned to any particular doctrine.

Eventually, the donor class—corporate and individual alike—realized that turning on one another was bad for business, politically speaking, when it came to their own coffers.

Though neither for patriotic nor altruistic reasons, they yanked their megadollar funding away from extremist causes, sitting office-holders, and wacko candidates and diverted their donations back into the campaign funds of resurgent traditional Republicans. The traditional factions again popped up their heads and seized control of the party, with some of this newer generation of party leaders tracing their roots back to the more socially liberal Rockefeller wing of the 1960s, while others were more Reaganesque in their positions. Those two resurgent wings of the Republican Party resumed their ancient doctrinal sparring over long-standing matters, from fiscal policy and taxation to same-sex marriage and abortion, so disagreements between the factions were still the order of the day; but the GOP soon looked like Act Two of its mid-to-later twentieth-century incarnation.

But make no mistake: The ugliness that had overtaken the party in the late 2010s and into the 2020s was still very much present alongside the two traditional factions, even if the advocates and practitioners of draconian far-right politics had been amazingly shunted aside as the party's minority for the time being.

The detailed history of the schism was still being written, but the end result was that those who were leftovers from the dark forces of a decade earlier, along with relative newcomers who were doctrinally aligned after coming of age during the troubled years, abruptly bailed from the Republican Party en masse during the first week of August. This time, the estrangement would lead to a political divorce with the instant formation of the Restore American Values and Greatness Party.

The new party's name sent an unmistakable message. One was either all-in on transforming the American landscape fully in accordance with the Party's doctrine, or one was a hated enemy of the American people and must be vanquished. No middle ground existed in this winner-takes-all showdown that had finally arrived.

With their opponents warring against each other, the Democrats easily took sizable majorities in the House and the Senate in the 2030 midterms...much to their regret, since who would have really wanted to be in power when the Second Great Depression began in late January of the following year?

Dating back to the aftermath of 9/11, and then continuing through the Great Recession and into the brutal COVID-19 economic shutdown, the nation's financial health (or lack thereof) was nothing more than a governmental version of an individual with every credit card maxed out and a crushing debt load that couldn't possibly ever be paid off. Every financial weapon was now expended; every sleight-of-hand trick by the Fed and the Treasury Department deployed and then exhausted; every overseas savior otherwise occupied, now unable or unwilling to buy up the nation's latest several trillion dollars of debt.

A late-January stock market sell-off, triggered by the latest flare-up between the U.S. and Iran that coincided with a series of corporate earnings reports falling shockingly and dramatically short of the Street's expectations, quickly snowballed out of control. The losses were compounded by mountains of highly leveraged derivative instruments that collapsed into one another. The market indices all lost close to fifty percent in less than three months, though that initial free-fall was quickly followed by a furious three-week "bear trap" rally that recovered nearly forty percent of the market losses.

FOMO—the fear of missing out—was as potent of a siren's song as ever, and the last vestiges of prudent portfolio management were now thrown to the wind. Sidelined cash flooded the market, quickly driving the indices upward another fifteen percent during only two trading days. Social media lit up and a new rag-tag collection of so-called "meme stocks"

roared to life and rocketed upward by the minute, with many of them booking dizzying ten- or even twenty-fold gains during those same two days.

This time, however, the sucker's rally betrayed the hardened believers and opportunists alike when the markets soon rolled over and resumed their downward plunge far past the previous lows, before spending the remainder of 2031 ratcheting further south without pause. The long-standing mantras of "buy the dip" and "don't get caught out of the market when stock prices come roaring back" were finally proven false. Safe havens were non-existent: U.S. and international stocks, big caps and small caps alike, corporate and government paper, gold, commodities, crypto...*everything* crashed. Even the private equity firms were burned when they came swooping in with their war chests of cash and easy credit, only to see their vulture capital investments join the free fall.

This time, the Fed, Treasury, and the rest of the government were all out of silver bullets. Housing values collapsed en masse; unemployment skyrocketed; and the dominoes of the American financial system finally tumbled onto one another, culminating in the devaluing of the American dollar, the default on a portion of the nation's debt, and the true arrival of American Carnage.

The only ones who made out were those who ran ultra-bearish hedge funds and who had fortuitously locked in existing positions against the markets before the wreckage began, as well as a handful of high-profile traders who perfectly timed the early springtime sucker's rally and were in and out of the market at just the right times. Of course, the ill-advised appearances by some of those fortunate few hedge fund titans and self-promoting, big-bet traders on the financial news programs, grimly bragging about the billions they had made from the devastation, and with so many of those financial alchemists and stock market gamblers bearing surnames like Goldstein and Feldman and Rosenbaum, played right into the hands of those in search of easily marked Enemies of the People.

The Restore American Values and Greatness Party saw its opportunity, and into the void stepped Ephraim Hollinger. Hollinger's carefully burnished reputation as an extremely successful businessman had been earned through accomplishment, rather than conjured through sleight of hand and puffery. He had created a global conglomerate out of literally nothing; he was the personification of the self-made man. He came from humble beginnings in east-central Pennsylvania. For the sake of symbolism, Hollinger had been born during the nation's bicentennial year, two months before that glorious celebration. It was now readily apparent that America's more subdued 250th birthday in 2026 had been very much a last hurrah, and the nation had clearly jumped the shark since then. Perhaps the United States of America was unsalvageable. Or maybe, just maybe, one man alone could mean the nation's salvation.

Ephraim Hollinger easily won the RAVG Party's nomination for its presidential candidate in 2032; "easily" because he ran unopposed. As such, Hollinger was able to keep key portions of his messaging largely under wraps until after his pro forma nomination in early August, at which time he unloaded his arsenal.

America *can* be saved, he promised with grim determination, as long as we can dispense with political correctness and call out this nation's *true* enemies, so we can finally deal with all of them, for all time.