

PART I

THE CONVENTIONS

A SLUMPED FIGURE SAT IN a wingback chair in the middle of the room, oblivious to the crush of sweating bodies that filled the presidential suite of the Chicago Hilton to capacity. Crackling walkie-talkies and shrilling cell phones rang out above the deafening volume of television sets. The Chicago skyline twinkled against the black abyss of Lake Michigan.

The man lazily draped a leg over the arm of the chair, revealing a polished black ostrich cowboy boot. His chin rested on the palm of his hand. “Jay?” he called, his gaze never leaving the television set in front of him.

Another man approached.

“Jay, how did you manage to *lose* a governor?” the man in the wingback chair asked, incredulous.

Governor Robert W. Long of California sat like a dinghy bobbing in the eye of a hurricane. Not a hair out of place, he was a study of calm. His athletic frame was folded into pressed charcoal-gray slacks and a crisp, white shirt, and his well-coiffed, wavy brown hair was streaked with gray. His steely blue eyes surveyed the scene. Senior campaign staff shouted orders to harried subordinates. Clutches of aides huddled in corners, trading the latest rumors in power whispers. After a twenty-month, \$400 million, 300,000-air-mile, forty-four-state marathon, the campaign for the Democratic presidential nomination hurtled toward its finish. It had been a clash of titans, an epic battle unlike any witnessed by a major political party in two generations. Everyone in the room had earned their way here, fighting and clawing their way up the sheer, craggy rock of American politics, but all their years of plotting had not prepared them for this hysteria. Senior staff fought off the combined effects of caffeine, alcohol, and exhaustion. They screamed into walkie-talkies while \$500-an-hour lawyers gathered at a conference table, poring over delegate lists and plotting strategy for the impending fight over the credentials committee report. Room-service waiters in faux tuxedo uniforms rushed to and fro, dispensing drinks and carrying off discarded glasses and bottles on the trays they held aloft. Governor Long’s family tensely gathered on a sectional couch behind him, unsure if they were witnessing a wake or a wedding.

The problem: no one could find Governor Terry Tinford of Tennessee.

“He disappeared like Tinker Bell in a demilitarized zone,” said Jay Noble, Long’s senior campaign strategist, a grizzled veteran of two decades of Democratic Party politics. His body a compact bundle of energy with a thatch of thick brown hair combed across a high forehead, his shirt soaked with sweat, Noble gave off a faint body odor. “He told someone he was going to the bathroom. That was twenty minutes ago.”

“Try his cell.” Long’s eyes smoldered with frustration.

“It’s going straight to voice mail. We have people posted at every entrance in the hall. We sent someone to the DGA suite to see if he went there,” Noble said, using the acronym for the Democratic Governors Association.

“You better find him—and I mean right now,” ordered Long. They were counting on Tinford to deliver critical votes in the South. “He knew the credentials committee report was coming to the floor, right?”

“Absolutely. I spoke to him two hours ago and he was ready to go.”

“He’ll show,” predicted Long, sounding as if he were trying to convince himself. “I’ve known Terry for thirty years—since we worked together on our first campaign. He wouldn’t stab me in the back.”

“We’re on it, sir,” Noble assured him.

Long rubbed his chin, deep in thought. He had no illusions about Tinford, an ambitious, two-faced climber. Tinford no doubt believed it should be him, not Long, now standing thirty-nine delegate votes from the Democratic presidential nomination. But if Tinford started playing games now—at the eleventh hour—he would commit political suicide. He had endorsed Long and helped him win the Tennessee primary. Was he trying to miss the credentials vote, hedging his bets? It was a distinct possibility. That would be classic Tinford.

Betrayal was part of the game. But Long reassured himself with the thought that Tinford wasn’t smart enough to pull it off. He was a lieutenant, not a general.

Noble rushed off sick to his stomach, his heart racing, his mouth dry as cotton. He smelled a rat.

FIVE BLOCKS AWAY, SECRET Service agents in dark suits guarded the door to the presidential suite at the Drake Hotel. Inside sat the senior senator from New Jersey and Senate majority leader, Salmon P. Stanley. His wife and two teenage daughters watched the convention in an adjoining room, respecting his need to be alone at this time of high anxiety. The only sound in the room was the muffled hush of air-conditioning and the barely audible television. Stanley had the thermostat set to the approximate temperature of a meat freezer.

Two raps sounded at the door. Michael Kaplan, Stanley's campaign chairman, glided into the room with breezy confidence. Tall and lanky, he had the build of a long-distance runner. But age had taken its toll, the soft flesh around his jowls beginning to sag. Wrinkles creased his leathery face. His jet-black hair had turned gray at the temples, highlighting piercing black eyes that seemed to bore through people.

"Senator, we have a breakthrough on the credentials report." He paused. "It's a little dicey."

"What is it?" asked Stanley.

"We've been talking to Terry Tinford through an intermediary," related Kaplan.

"But he's a Long man. He drank the Kool-Aid, didn't he?" objected Stanley.

"He did." Kaplan paused. "But it seems he would like to be vice president."

"I can't commit to that," Stanley shot back, eyes unblinking.

"Of course not." Kaplan looked at the ceiling and exhaled, his mind maneuvering in tricky waters. "But the credentials report vote is too close to call. We're up eight votes with 113 undecided. We're twisting so many arms you can hear bones snap, but we've hit a wall. Tinford might break it loose."

"What do you think?" asked Stanley.

Kaplan knew the drill; the boss wanted his unvarnished opinion. "Senator, this is an opportunity to take a key state right out of Long's hide. It would be a devastating psychological blow—a border-state centrist and a governor bailing out on him the night before the nomination." He paused to let the full weight of the opportunity sink in. "The credentials vote will decide the nominee. This is for all the marbles."

Stanley sat silently, eyes narrowed. The crow's feet around his eyes crinkled and the worry lines on his forehead deepened. He wore a blue coat and red striped tie as though at any moment he might be asked to appear in public, the slight paunch of his stomach peeking through his suit, his reddish hair and ruddy complexion highlighted by a receding hairline. He stared unseeing at the cable news talking heads (*Wayne's World* for political junkies, he called these shows) babbling away on the television. He stood on the threshold of the presidency, a goal he had worked for since he was a young man. But he could not have his hands tied in selecting his vice president.

"Promising Tinford the veep is a nonstarter. If we do it, people will say we bought his support." He leaned forward, eyes narrowed to slits, and jabbed the air with his index finger. "Tell Tinford—no witnesses—that we have to be able to say we did not discuss the vice presidency. He will be *seriously* considered—but only if we can deny he is *being* considered—even to him. I must be able to say to anyone who asks, with a straight face, he was never promised anything."

"I'll give it a go," Kaplan responded. He strode from the room. As he twisted the doorknob, he suddenly turned back toward Stanley as if he had forgotten something. "What if he says he can't do it without an ironclad commitment?"

"He won't," replied the senator. "Trust me. And if he does, we can't do business with him anyway."

Kaplan nodded. He was halfway out the door when Stanley stopped him. "Michael, how are you going to have a private conversation with Tinford in this pandemonium?" He pointed at the chaos unfolding on the television screen.

The right corner of Kaplan's mouth rose mischievously in a half smile. "He's waiting for me in a holding room at the convention center."

"Clear that room of staff," ordered Stanley. "No witnesses."

Kaplan nodded and closed the door behind him.