

In the waning hours of a presidency that was destined to arouse less interest from historians than any since perhaps that of William Henry Harrison (thirty-one days from inauguration to death), Arthur Morgan huddled in the Oval Office with his last remaining friend and pondered his final decisions. At that moment he felt as though he'd botched every decision in the previous four years, and he was not overly confident that he could, somehow, so late in the game, get things right. His friend wasn't so sure either, though, as always, he said little and whatever he did say was what the President wanted to hear.

They were about pardons-desperate pleas from thieves and embezzlers and liars, some still in jail and some who'd never served time but who nonetheless wanted their good names cleared and their beloved rights restored. All claimed to be friends, or friends of friends, or die-hard supporters, though only a few had ever gotten the chance to proclaim their support before that eleventh hour. How sad that after four tumultuous years of leading the free world it would all fizzle into one miserable pile of requests from a bunch of crooks. Which thieves should be allowed to steal again? That was the momentous question facing the President as the hours crept by.

The last friend was Critz, an old fraternity pal from their days at Cornell when Morgan ran the student government while Critz stuffed the ballot boxes. In the past four years, Critz had served as press secretary, chief of staff, national security advisor, and even secretary of state, though that appointment lasted for only three months and was hastily rescinded when Critz's unique style of diplomacy nearly ignited World War III. Critz's last appointment had taken place the previous October, in the final frantic weeks of the reelection onslaught. With the polls showing President Morgan trailing badly in at least forty states, Critz seized control of the campaign and managed to alienate the rest of the country, except, arguably, Alaska. It had been a historic election; never before had an incumbent president received so few electoral votes. Three to be exact, all from Alaska, the only state Morgan had not visited, at Critz's advice. Five hundred and thirty-five for the challenger, three for President Morgan. The word "landslide" did not even begin to capture the enormity of the shellacking.

Once the votes were counted, the challenger, following bad advice, decided to contest the results in Alaska. Why not go for all 538 electoral votes? he reasoned. Never again would a candidate for the presidency have the opportunity to completely whitewash his opponent, to throw the mother of all shutouts. For six weeks the President suffered even more while lawsuits raged in Alaska. When the supreme court there eventually awarded him the state's three electoral votes, he and Critz had a very quiet bottle of champagne.

President Morgan had become enamored of Alaska, even though the certified results gave him a scant seventeen-vote margin.

He should have avoided more states.

He even lost Delaware, his home, where the once-enlightened electorate had allowed him to serve eight wonderful years as governor. Just as he had never found the time to visit Alaska, his opponent had totally ignored Delaware-no organization to speak of, no television ads, not a single campaign stop. And his opponent still took 52 percent of the vote!

Critz sat in a thick leather chair and held a notepad with a list of a hundred things that needed to be done immediately. He watched his President move slowly from one window to the next, peering into the darkness, dreaming of what might have been. The man was depressed

and humiliated. At fifty-eight his life was over, his career a wreck, his marriage crumbling. Mrs. Morgan had already moved back to Wilmington and was openly laughing at the idea of living in a cabin in Alaska. Critz had secret doubts about his friend's ability to hunt and fish for the rest of his life, but the prospect of living two thousand miles from Mrs. Morgan was very appealing. They might have carried Nebraska if the rather blue-blooded First Lady had not referred to the football team as the "Sooners."

The Nebraska Sooners!

Overnight, Morgan fell so far in the polls in both Nebraska and Oklahoma that he never recovered.

And in Texas she took a bite of prizewinning chili and began vomiting. As she was rushed to the hospital a microphone captured her still-famous words: "How can you backward people eat such a putrid mess?"

Nebraska has five electoral votes. Texas has thirty-four. Insulting the local football team was a mistake they could have survived. But no candidate could overcome such a belittling description of Texas chili.

What a campaign! Critz was tempted to write a book. Someone needed to record the disaster.

Their partnership of almost forty years was ending. Critz had lined up a job with a defense contractor for \$200,000 a year, and he would hit the lecture circuit at \$50,000 a speech if anybody was desperate enough to pay it. After dedicating his life to public service, he was broke and aging quickly and anxious to make a buck.

The President had sold his handsome home in Georgetown for a huge profit. He'd bought a small ranch in Alaska, where the people evidently admired him. He planned to spend the rest of his days there, hunting, fishing, perhaps writing his memoirs. Whatever he did in Alaska, it would have nothing to do with politics and Washington. He would not be the senior statesman, the grand old man of anybody's party, the sage voice of experience. No farewell tours, convention speeches, endowed chairs of political science. No presidential library. The people had spoken with a clear and thunderous voice. If they didn't want him, then he could certainly live without them. "We need to make a decision about Cuccinello," Critz said. The President was still standing at a window, looking at nothing in the darkness, still pondering Delaware. "Who?"

"Figgy Cuccinello, that movie director who was indicted for having sex with a young starlet."

"How young?"

"Fifteen, I think."

"That's pretty young."

"Yes, it is. He fled to Argentina, where he's been for ten years. Now he's homesick, wants to come back and start making dreadful movies again. He says his art is calling him home."

"Perhaps the young girls are calling him home."

"That too."

"Seventeen wouldn't bother me. Fifteen's too young."

"His offer is up to five million."

The President turned and looked at Critz. "He's offering five million for a pardon?"

"Yes, and he needs to move quickly. The money has to be wired out of Switzerland. It's three in the morning over there."

"Where would it go?"

"We have accounts offshore. It's easy."

"What would the press do?"

"It would be ugly."

"It's always ugly."

"This would be especially ugly."

"I really don't care about the press," Morgan said.

Then why did you ask? Critz wanted to say.

"Can the money be traced?" the President asked and turned back to the window.

"No."

With his right hand, the President began scratching the back of his neck, something he always did when wrestling with a difficult decision. Ten minutes before he almost nuked North Korea, he'd scratched until the skin broke and blood oozed onto the collar of his white shirt. "The answer is no," he said. "Fifteen is too young."

Without a knock, the door opened and Artie Morgan, the President's son, barged in holding a Heineken in one hand and some papers in the other.

"Just talked to the CIA," he said casually. He wore faded jeans and no socks.

"Maynard's on the way over." He dumped the papers on the desk and left the room, slamming the door behind him.