

Also by Jerry DiCairano

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Hawaiian in New Jersey

Jerry DiCairano

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The Red Army

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Lyndon Johnson—the clone, not the original—stared blankly through the windows of the Oval Office and wished what so many Copies of Great People wished every day: *If only I'd been born a normal person—a regular two-bit schnook with my own genes.*

It had been a long, unsatisfying day for the president, made especially horrible by a hit piece that had appeared that afternoon on the website of *Timeless Magazine*. In the words of Johnson's hard-boiled advisers, some self-serving news hound, searching for new evidence that old folks were abusing the health system, had profiled a half-crazed, half-dead senior in New Jersey who was avoiding his planned termination by applying for a job in an "endangered profession"; i.e., one experiencing critical shortages. The senior—an 86-year-old nursing-home resident of Italian descent—was very close to snagging a position as a "Hawaiian-language-speaking airline mechanic, third class," even though he knew little about aircraft and apparently even less about the Hawaiian language.

Though Johnson himself was famously ambivalent about killing oldsters, the story was the kind of hot-button piece that would really irk younger voters, and with his poll numbers already sagging and election day just three months off, the president and his team wanted no part of a generational war.

Yes, it had been another long, tiring day. Johnson took a small mirror from his desk drawer and studied his sagging face. Damn! Were the sacks under his eyes growing larger or just darker? And the jowls and forehead! The jowls looked like little bags of shot hanging from his cheeks. The forehead was a sea of wrinkles. Lifting his eyes, the president compared his aging image to that of the first L.B.J., whose portrait sneered ominously from across the room. The father Johnson had eschewed plastic surgery, and so, therefore, must the clone, said the idiot advisers, the self-serving political climbers who “knew best” and who treated Johnson like a child king, an innocent know-nothing to be coddled and humored and only peripherally consulted. It might be worth losing the election just to get away from those people, Johnson thought. But short of that—he smiled cynically—he certainly could continue to tweak and annoy them. He had to chuckle. Lately, he’d found it fun to puncture their egos by misstating their positions or names or, more commonly, deliberately misrepresenting the details of their favorite projects. A certain Isabelle Blocker came to mind. Twice Johnson had introduced her as an FCC commissioner when, in fact, she was a prominent deputy at the FTC. The looks on the poor woman’s face were priceless.

On the other side of Johnson’s windows, the thick August air hung like a gray gauze over the lawns and flower gardens. In the scorching haze of the afternoon, the grass looked green-gray, and the yellow and red roses seemed hobbled and listless, like all those old

people expecting nature or government to end their infirmities. Normally, Johnson took walks across the south lawn—to limber up and to get away from the political horseflies. But it was too damn hot to go outside (even the president of the United States had no say over the weather), so Johnson sat peering at the dispirited lawn and the panting gardens, allowing his cynicism to further hijack his thoughts. *Why am I even running for re-election?* he asked himself. *Suppose I told that slime Natchez that I was bowing out! What could he do to me? —kill me? Why am I responsible for the health and future of the Democratic party? It can't go on without me? Somehow I'm obligated to the party because I live in a large house and fly on Air Force One? Small compensation. Pitifully small for a guy with no freedom, no autonomy, not even my own lousy name, for God's sake! Hang the mansion and the airplane! Hang it all!*

Adding to Johnson's depression was the nagging notion that he had accomplished little of substance in his first three and half years as president. Yes, there were the anti-poverty bills, the job-training bills, the tax increases—God knows the party hacks had pushed for those—but the real problems had only festered and grown worse from inattention. Inflation, regulation, and deficit spending were stifling business and the economy. Public education was failing at all levels. The federal health system was broke, broken, and short of doctors. And there was no desire, he thought, no will whatsoever among his party's elected officials to change anything. No will to make the hard choices. The only thing those corrupt bastards sincerely cared about was winning re-election—re-election at any cost.

Bing went his phone. It was his secretary, Christie Loblolly, one of the few people in his inner circle whom he actually liked and trusted. "Yes, Christie."

"Mr. President, Ms. Steward is on the line. She says its urgent."

"I'll be the judge of that. What's she want?" Steward was a thirty-something, cold-as-ice feminist attorney who had made her bones in the Labor Department by harassing non-unionized retailers. The woman oozed haughtiness, and Johnson loathed her.

"She says it's about the 'Red Army' story on Timeless."

"No chance. I've had enough of that for one day."

"Shall I have her call you back later in the week, sir?"

"Umm, wait." Johnson started to crack a smile. "Tell you what—bring her by in about twenty minutes. Maybe I'll just challenge her a little."

Oh, God! thought Christie. *He's in one of his moods!* Quietly into the phone, she said, "Please tell me you're kidding."

"Right," he said flatly and insincerely. "I'm kidding."

"I'm coming in," Christie said sternly. She and the president had been college buddies and could be quite frank with each other. In a moment, she was in his office, waving a finger behind closed doors. "Lyndon, I know you're bored and angry, but how do you help yourself by making enemies of these people?"

He dodged the question. "Maybe I'll show her my copter."

"Oh, God, Lyndon. Don't!"

"She wasn't there when I flew it before, was she?"

"Really, Lyndon! You have no idea how infantile you looked!"

A week earlier, Johnson had shocked and tormented a small gathering of staffers by piloting a tiny radio-controlled helicopter barely above their heads in the Blue Room. Worse, he had laughed hysterically when half of them had shrieked and dived for cover. And now, of course, there was hallway chatter that the old man had "lost it" completely.

"Lyndon," Christie pleaded, gesturing with her small, freckled

hands, "If Steward sees that thing, she'll jump out of her skin!"

He smiled eagerly. "Think so?"

She pierced him with her green Irish eyes. "Lyndon, I will NOT send her in unless you *promise* not to—"

"My promises are worthless," he said dryly. "It's campaign season."

She crossed her arms, lowered her chin slightly, and stared at him above her reading glasses—same pose a frustrated grandmother uses against a stubborn three-year-old. "Are you going to behave?"

"Send her in!"

"Do I hear a "yes"?"

"That'll be all, Christie. Thank you."

She shook her head. "The day we leave this place, Mr. President . . ."

"Right. I know." Her threat of a withering, post-presidential scolding had long ago lost its punch.

She wrinkled her mouth in defeat and said, "I'll give her five minutes. Now behave!"

Moments later, Jasmine Beldon-Brennbrecker-Steward stood nervously before the president, waiting for an invitation to take a seat. Johnson looked up from some papers, remained seated, and said, "What's on your mind?"

Erect, skinny, primly dressed in a gray pants suit, Steward brushed back her short, candy-pink hair and took a few tentative steps across the thick carpet. "Good afternoon, Mr. Pres—"

"Wait. What's today's ribbon?" Johnson interrupted, rising at last and squinting over his glasses at an orange "awareness" bow which Steward wore on her lapel.

"Oh, computer equality, sir."

"Really. I haven't heard of that one."

"Well, tragically, Mr. President, over seventy-five percent of the world's personal computing devices are owned by only thirty percent of the world's population. As you might expect, people in the underprivileged countries lack the resources—and in many cases the training—to purchase and operate these devices."

"Yikes!" said Johnson. It was his favorite new word. Do-gooders like Steward couldn't tell whether he was mocking them or expressing honest concern. "What do you propose we do about it?"

"Sir, with your permission, of course, we're looking at proposing a U.N.-sponsored technology tax, which would seek revenue from the advanced nations based on internet usage, number of devices, and other criteria. Then that revenue would be invested in the form of foreign aid to countries which are still operating at the lower altitudes." ("Operating at the lower altitudes" [OPALA] had become a popular political expression after a former astronaut-turned-Democratic-senator had used it to describe under-performing students who attended elementary-school-level reading and math classes at the nation's colleges.)

"Do you support the U.N., Ms. Steward?"

Such a question! "Of course, I do," she said emphatically, her dark eyes darting left and right.

Just to tick her off, Johnson creased his brow and muttered, "A lot of kooks and crooks up there, don't you think?"

My God, what is he trying to do to me? Is he testing me somehow? thought Steward. "I'm not aware of either, sir" seemed a safe answer.

"Mmm," said Johnson, squinting again at the ribbon. Steward straightened up and cleared her throat.

I'll really get her now! thought the president. He fingered his chin

and asked, "Who do you work for, Steward?"

Gasp! *What kind of question . . . ? Is it possible he doesn't even know who I work for?!* "I'm Assistant Deputy Counsel to the Deputy Chief of Staff, sir."

"Really!" said Johnson, thinking he'd really twist the screws. "That surprises me." And he cocked his head slightly and squinted at her for a moment as if trying to place her in the White House hierarchy. "Hmm. Well, it's not important," he said finally. Tell me about this Red Army stuff. Frankly, I haven't paid much attention." Not true, but a nice jab.

Steward winced, drew herself up, and ever so tactfully—ever so *simply* to the child king—retold the horrible real-life fairy tale of the old people, the ungrateful, indigent, creepy codgers who refused to die on cue under the previous president's Death with Dignity Act.

"Under some regrettable loophole in the law—" said Steward, "one which we're earnestly trying to close—anyone who grows a minimum of 5.2 bushels of vegetables per annum can claim farmer's status and thus exempt herself (or himself) from certain provisions, namely those which require patriotic termination upon the exhaustion of one's prosperity points."

Deliberately, Johnson stared through her as if he'd heard hardly a word. "So?" he said.

"Well, sir, this story confirms what we've heard whispers of earlier: namely that some of our elderly nursing-home clients are growing tomatoes in their rooms."

"Really? Well, good for their health at least."

Sheesh! What a dunce! "Perhaps, sir, but the point is, they're claiming to be farmers, you see—to earn the protected status and avoid their patriotic obligations."

"Oh! I see!" said Johnson. Then, wrinkling his brow as if straining to further understand, he added, "You mean, they don't want to croak?"

Oh, my God, he's playing with me! Or is he? Oh, God! Stay calm. Just answer matter of factly and get the hell out. "You could put it that way," replied Ms. Steward tentatively, sighing slightly and wringing her bony hands.

"And?" coaxed Johnson.

Be professional, be thorough, and get out! "And this article is particularly egregious—horrible, I should say—because it tells the story of a blatant offender who is not only growing tomatoes, but also trying to earn protection in a second critical profession."

"And what would that be, Ms. Steward?"

"Aircraft mechanic, sir. And he's eighty-six years old!"

"What kind of aircraft mechanic?"

"Well, a regular mechanic, I suppose—whatever would be protected under the law."

"Not what I mean. I mean what kind of aircraft."

"Oh." An unsettling thought pinged in Steward's brain. *My God, he's not going to fetch that toy helicopter, is he?* "I—I don't know, sir. The article doesn't say."

"Have you heard about my toy copter?" asked the president.

With a fearful stare: "Yes, sir. Actually, I have—somewhat."

"Watch this," said Johnson. Quickly, he took a small controller from a desk drawer and advanced twin plastic levers. A piercing whine echoed within a nearby trash can, and a moment later, a green-and-black miniature of *Marine One* shot upwards, hitting the ceiling and then crashing to a halt on the president's desk. "Oops," said the president. "Let's try again." On its second voyage, the copter stayed

low, ricocheted off the top of a chair, and struck Steward in the thigh. She screamed and ran toward the door, in the process falling out of a shoe and tumbling onto the president's carpet.

"Shit!" she said. Then remembering where she was, she added, "Oh, I'm sorry, Mr. President."

"I've heard that word before. Are you all right?" And he helped her climb back to her feet. "Here's your shoe."

"I'm so sorry. I—I guess I was startled."

"My fault. Are you cut?"

"Oh, no, no."

"Where did it hit you?"

"In my leg."

"Good thing you're wearing pants."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm very sorry, Ms. Steward."

"No harm," she smiled, replacing her shoe.

"Glad you could stop by."

Steward looked at him incredulously and dashed away.

Immediately, Christie was standing in the doorway, her eyes flashing. "*Mis-ter President!*"

"Don't blow a gasket," he said, bending over to retrieve the crashed copter. "I said I was sorry."

Christie quickly closed the door. "Unless you want to leave this place in a straight jacket, you'll throw that thing away and never mention it again!"

He drew the copter away, holding it behind his back.

"My God, Lyndon! My—stop smirking. I'll get her on the phone and apologize profusely. Then I suggest you go upstairs and hide for a while!"

"Don't I get points for ruining her day?"

"I'm not going to dignify that comment."

"All right, call her up. Put her in charge of the nursing-home tomato scandal. That'll make her happy."

"Fine!"

And then Johnson, who was down in the polls among voters sixty and older—and who, like Christie and a few others in the building, felt compassion for the nation's indigent seniors, hastily added, "But, for God's sake, don't let her kill anybody!"