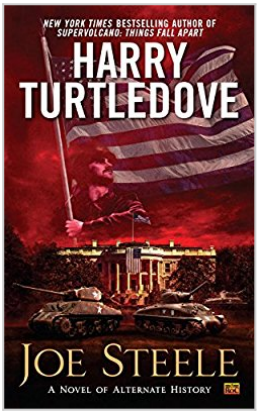

Joe Steele

By Harry Turtledove

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The *New York Times* bestselling author of the Supervolcano trilogy envisions the election of a United States President whose political power will redefine what the nation is—and what it means to be American…

The Great Depression continues to cast its dark shadow over the country. Desperate times call for desperate measures, so the Democratic Party makes an interesting nomination for their Presidential candidate: California Congressman Joe Steele, the son of a Russian immigrant laborer who identifies more with the common man than with the wealthy power brokers in Washington D.C.

Achieving a landslide victory, President Joe Steele wastes no time pushing through Congress reforms that put citizens back to work. Anyone who gets in his way is getting in the way of America, and that includes the highest in the land. But Steele's homeland political enemies pale in comparison to European tyrants whose posturing seems sure to drag America into war…

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Editorial Review

Review
“Entertaining...Turtledove fans and people who enjoy dystopias will certainly want to pick up *Joe Steele*."—SFFWorld

“If you like playing with ‘what-if’s’ in your fiction, then *Joe Steele* offers you a lot to think about. In the end, I loved it."—Alternate HIstory Weekly Update

About the Author

Harry Turtledove, the *New York Times* bestselling author of the Supervolcano trilogy and the Atlantis trilogy, has a PhD in Byzantine history. Nominated for the Nebula Award, he has won the Hugo, Sidewise, and John Esthen Cook awards. He lives with his wife and children in California.

ALSO BY HARRY TURTLEDOVE

Joe Steele is for Janis Ian.

The novel Joe Steele has plotline derived from the short story “Joe Steele,” which appeared in Stars: Original Stories Based on the Songs of Janis Ian, edited by Janis Ian and Mike Resnick (DAW Books: New York, 2001). In “god & the fbi,” Janis wrote “Stalin was a Democrat . . .” I started wondering how and why Stalin might have become a Democrat, and the story grew from there. So that’s one reason why I’ve dedicated the novel to her.

But wait! There’s more! When I was a teenager, still living at home, I listened to Janis’ music and read the article about her in Life. (She was a teenager, still living at home, then, too.) I never dreamt then that I might one day meet her. I really never dreamt then that we might become friends. That we have means a lot to me in a lot of different ways. So thanks, Janis. Thanks for everything. This one’s for you.

I

Charlie Sullivan never expected to meet Joe Steele in the service elevator of a cheap hotel only a couple of blocks from the Chicago Stadium. The AP stringer gaped at the Presidential candidate when Steele boarded on the second floor. Charlie had slipped the boss cook a buck, so he got on and off in the kitchen as he pleased.

“You’re—him!” Charlie blurted when Joe Steele and one of his aides strode into the car. Long-standing tradition said that candidates stayed away from the convention till it nominated them . . . if it did.

Governor Franklin Roosevelt, Steele’s main rival for the Democratic nomination in this summer of America’s discontent, was still in the Executive Mansion in Albany. Charlie’s older brother, Mike, who wrote for the *New York Post*, was covering him there. Roosevelt’s operatives worked the Stadium hotels and bars just as hard as Joe Steele’s, though. They glad-handed. They promised. They spread favors around.

“I am him,” the Congressman from California agreed. His smile didn’t reach his eyes. Charlie Sullivan was a scrawny five-eight, but he overtopped Joe Steele by three inches. Steele stood straight, though, so you might not notice how short he was. That his henchman, a cold-looking fellow named Vince Scriabin, was about the same size also helped.

“But . . . What are you doing in town?” Charlie asked.

The elevator door groaned shut. Joe Steele punched the button for 5. Then he scratched at his mustache. It was bushy and graying; he was in his early fifties. His hair, also iron-gray, gave a little at the temples. He had bad skin—either he’d had horrible pimples or he’d got through a mild case of smallpox. His eyes were an interesting color, a yellow-brown that almost put you in mind of a hunting animal.

“Officially, I’m in Fresno,” he said as the elevator lurched upward. That fierce, hawklike stare burned into Charlie. “You might embarrass me if you wrote that I was here.”

Vince Scriabin eyed Charlie, too, as if fitting him for a coffin. Scriabin also wore a mustache, an anemic one that looked all the more so beside Joe Steele’s. He had wire-framed glasses and combed dark, greasy hair over a widening bald spot. People said he was very bad news. Except for the scowl, you couldn’t tell by looking.

Joe Steele’s stare, though less outwardly tough, worried Charlie more. Or it would have, if he’d been on FDR’s side. But he said, “We need some changes—need ’em bad. Roosevelt talks big, but I think you’re more likely to deliver.”

“I am.” Joe Steele nodded. He wasn’t a big man, but he had a big head. “Four years ago, Hoover promised two chickens in every pot and two cars in every garage. And what did he give us? Two chickens in every garage!” Despite the big mustache, Charlie saw his lip twist.

Charlie laughed as the service elevator opened. “Good one, Congressman!” he said. “Don’t worry about me. I’ll keep my trap shut.”

“I wasn’t worrying.” Joe Steele stepped out of the little car. “Come on, Vince. Let’s see what kind of deal we can fix with John.” Scriabin followed him. The door groaned shut again. The elevator lurched up toward Charlie’s seventh-floor room.

His mind whirred all the way there. You couldn’t find a more common name than John. But John Nance Garner, the Speaker of the House from Texas, also had a Presidential yen, and controlled his state’s delegation as well as other votes from the Deep South. He wasn’t likely to land the top spot on the ticket. Swinging him one way or the other could get expensive for Steele or Roosevelt.

Roosevelt had never known a day’s want in his life. His family went back to before New Amsterdam turned into New York. His cousin Theodore had been Governor ahead of him, and had served almost two full terms as President after the turn of the century.

Joe Steele was a different story. His folks got out of the Russian Empire and into America only a few months before he was born. He became a citizen well ahead of them. As a kid, he picked grapes under Fresno's hot sun, and few suns came hotter.

He hadn't been born Joe Steele. He'd changed his name when he went from farm laborer to labor agitator. The real handle sounded like a drunken sneeze. Several relatives still wore it.

Not all prices were payable in cash, of course. John Nance Garner might want as much power as he could get if he couldn't be President. Veep? Supreme Court Justice? Secretary of War?

Charlie Sullivan laughed as he strode down the hall to the sweltering top-floor room. He wasn't just building castles in the air, he was digging out their foundations before he built them. Not only didn't he know what Garner wanted, he didn't know whether Joe Steele and Scriabin had been talking about him to begin with.

The first thing he did when he went inside was to pull the cord that started the ceiling fan spinning. The fan stirred the hot, humid air a little, but didn't cool it.

Chicago Stadium was just as bad. No, worse—Chicago Stadium was packed full of shouting, sweating people. A handful of trains, restaurants, and movie houses boasted refrigerated air-conditioning. The new scientific marvel got you too cold in summer, as central heating made you sweat in January.

But air-conditioning didn't exist at the Chicago Stadium. Inside the massive amphitheater, you roasted as God had intended. If you walked around with an apple in your mouth, someone would stick a fork in you and eat you.

And too many Democrats knew more about politics than they did about Ivory or Palmolive or Mum. Some doused themselves in aftershave to try to hide the problem. The cure might have been worse than the disease. Or, when you remembered how some of the other politicos smelled, it might not.

Charlie eyed the Remington portable that sat on a nightstand by the bed. It didn't quite lie about its name; he'd lugged it here without rupturing himself. He sure wouldn't haul it to the convention floor, though. If he dropped it out the window, it would make a big hole in the sidewalk. And it would drive any passerby into the ground like a hammer driving a nail.

"Nope," he said. For the floor, he had notebooks and pencils. Reporters would have covered Lincoln's nomination in Chicago the same way. They would have given their copy to telegraphers the same way, too, though he could also phone his in.

He could make a splash if he reported that Joe Steele was in town to fight for the nomination in person. He suspected his brother would have. Mike liked FDR more than Charlie did.

Whoever nabbed the Democratic nomination this summer would take the oath of office in Washington next March. The Republicans were dead men walking. Poor stupid bastards, they were the only ones who didn't know it.

They'd elected Herbert Hoover in a landslide in 1928. When Wall Street crashed a year later, the land slid, all right. Hoover meant well. Even Charlie Sullivan, who couldn't stand him, wouldn't have argued that. No doubt the fellow who'd rearranged the deck chairs on the *Titanic* after it hit the iceberg did, too.

No, when your name stuck to the shantytowns full of people who had nowhere better to live, you wouldn't win a second term. Yet the Republican faithful had gathered here in June to nominate him again. Charlie

wondered if they'd bothered looking outside of Chicago Stadium before they did.

He stuck a straw hat on his head and rode down on the regular elevator. His clothes would stick to him by the time he got to the Stadium. Why give them a head start by taking the stairs?

No sign of Joe Steele in the lobby. Through air blue with cigarette smoke, Charlie did spot Vince Scriabin and Lazar Kagan, another of Steele's wheeler-dealers, bending the ear of some corn-fed Midwestern politician. He was pretty sure Scriabin saw him, too, but Steele's man never let on. Scriabin wasn't anyone you'd want to play cards against.

Lighting a Chesterfield of his own, Charlie hurried west along Washington Boulevard toward the Chicago Stadium. He went by Union Park on the way. An old man sat on a park bench, tossing crumbs to pigeons and squirrels. Maybe he was making time go by. Then again, maybe he was hunting tonight's supper.

Charlie didn't look behind him when he tossed away his cigarette butt. Somebody would pick it up. You didn't want to take a man's pride, watching him do something like that. He wouldn't want you to see what he was reduced to, either.

Two ragged men slept under the trees. A bottle lay near one. By that, and by his stubble, he might have been sleeping on the grass for years. The other guy, who used a crumpled fedora for a pillow, was younger and neater. If he didn't have some kind of hard-luck story to tell, Charlie would have been amazed.

He also didn't look back at a thirtyish woman who gave him the eye. Some gals thought they had no better way to get by. It wasn't as if Charlie had never seen the inside of a sporting house. This poor, drab sister only gave him the blues, though.

He walked past a tailor's shop with a GOING OUT OF BUSINESS! sign in the window. Next door stood a shuttered bank. Close to forty banks had gone under in a local panic earlier in the year. They wouldn't be the last, either. These days, Charlie kept his money under his mattress. Thieves with masks seemed a smaller risk than the ones who wore green eyeshades.

Chicago Stadium was the biggest indoor arena in the country. The red-brick pile had a gently curving roofline. Lots of American flags flew from it any day of the week. With the convention there, they'd draped it with so much red-white-and-blue bunting, it might as well have been gift-wrapped.

Cops and reporters and politicians milled around outside. Charlie thought of the line Will Rogers used to fracture audiences all over the country: *I am not a member of any organized political party. I am a Democrat.* The scene here lived up to, or down to, it all too well.

"Press pass," a flatfoot growled at him.

"For Chrissake, Eddie," Charlie said—they'd had coffee and donuts together plenty of times when he wrote for a Chicago paper.

"Press pass," Eddie repeated. "I gotta log that I'm doin' it for everybody." A disgusted look on his face, he showed a notebook of his own. Bureaucrats were taking over the world.

Charlie displayed the press pass. The cop scribbled and waved him on. The first thing he saw when he got inside was Huey Long, as comfortable as anyone could be in there with a white linen suit and a blue silk shirt, laying down the law to someone much bigger in an undertaker's suit of black wool. Listening to Huey made the man even less happy than baking in that outfit.

Whenever Charlie saw the Kingfish, lines about the jawbone of an ass jumped into his mind. Long made such an easy target. He couldn't possibly be as big a buffoon as he seemed . . . could he?

A loud brass band blaring away and a demonstration much less spontaneous than it looked turned the floor to chaos. The great state of Texas—as if there could be any other kind at a convention—had just nominated its favorite son, John Nance Garner. No, it had placed his name in nomination. No, it had proudly placed his name in nomination. People seeking clear English at a gathering like this commonly needed to pay a sin tax on account of their leaders' syntax.

If a demonstration got big enough and rowdy enough, it could sweep previously undecided delegates along in its wake. It could, yes, but the odds were poor, especially at the Democrats' national clambake. The Democrats still hung on to the two-thirds rule.

Two delegates out of three had to agree on the Presidential candidate. If they didn't, the Democrats had no candidate. *Will Rogers isn't kidding*, Charlie thought as the demonstration began to lose steam.

The two-thirds rule had been around a long time. In 1860, the Democratic Party fractured because Stephen Douglas couldn't get over the hump. That let Lincoln win with a plurality far from a majority. Secession and civil war soon followed.

One might think that memories of such a disaster would scuttle the rule. One might, but one would be wrong. Just eight years earlier, in 1924, the Donkeys needed 103 ballots to nominate John W. Davis. By the time they got done, he was a national laughingstock. Calvin Coolidge walloped him in November.

The only Democratic President this century was Woodrow Wilson. He won the first time because Teddy Roosevelt's revolt split the GOP, and—barely—got reelected when he said he'd keep America away from the Great War . . . a promise he danced on less than a year later. Aside from that, the Democrats might as well have been short-pants kids swinging against Lefty Grove.

But they'd win this time. They couldn't very well not win this time. They might pluck Trotsky out of Red Russia and run him against Hoover. They'd win anyway, probably in a walk.

Somebody from Wisconsin was making a speech for Joe Steele. Why Wisconsin? It had to come down to courting delegates. "Joe Steele has a plan for this country! Joe Steele will set this country right!" the Congressman on the podium shouted.

People yelled themselves hoarse. Joe Steele did have a plan: a Four Year Plan, straightening things out through his first term. And Franklin D. Roosevelt offered the American people a New Deal, one he claimed would be better than the bad old deal they had now.

Hoover had no plan. Hoover stood for the old deal that had left the country in the ditch. He was making it up as he went along. He didn't even bother pretending he wasn't. He was about as political as a pine stump. No wonder he wouldn't win.

When the guy from the great state of Wisconsin proudly placed the name of Joe Steele in nomination for the office of President of the United States of America, the place went nuts. Confetti and straw hats flew. A new brass band did terrible things to "California, Here I Come." People snake-danced through the aisles screaming, "Joe Steele! Joe Steele! Joe Steele!"

Not everybody got caught up in the orchestrated frenzy. Big Jim Farley kept the New York delegation in line for Governor Roosevelt. He was FDR's field boss, the way Vince Scriabin was for Joe Steele. Roosevelt's

other chief sachem, Lou Howe, hadn't left his Madison Avenue office for a hick town like Chicago. That was how you heard it from Joe Steele's troops, anyway.

Roosevelt's people told a different story—surprise! They reminded people that Howe was an invalid, and didn't travel. They also claimed he made a better pol by remote control than most people who pumped your hand and breathed bourbon into your face.

You heard all kinds of things, depending on whose story you listened to at any given moment. Never having met Lou Howe, Charlie didn't know what to think about him. *Gotta ask Mike next time I talk to him or shoot him a wire,* the reporter thought.

There stood Farley by the aisle, thumbs dug into the front pockets of his trousers. He couldn't have radiated any more disgust if Typhoid Mary were prancing past him. Not even the suntanned California girls who made up part of the Golden State's delegation wiped the scowl off his jowly mug.

Charlie slipped between two dancers and bawled a question into Big Jim's imperfectly shell-like ear. Then he bawled it again, louder: "What do you think of this show of strength?"

"It's all bullshit, Charlie, piled up like in the stockyards," Farley shouted back.

Like any good politico, he was endlessly cynical. Even more than most, he made a point of knowing—and of making sure Roosevelt seemed to know—any reporter or legislator or preacher or fat cat he ran into. Charlie had heard he kept files on everyone he met so he and FDR would never get caught short. He didn't know if that was true, but he wouldn't have been surprised.

He also wasn't surprised at the answer. "C'mon, Jim," he said. "Give me something I can write for a family paper."

Farley said something about Joe Steele and a ewe that wasn't printable but sure as hell was funny. Then, he added, "You can say I said it was much sound and fury, signifying nothing. That's what it is, and that makes me sound smarter than I am."

He was sandbagging, of course. Charlie knew very few people smarter than Jim Farley. He wasn't sure Franklin D. Roosevelt was one of them, either. But Farley didn't have his own political ambitions. He worked to put his boss over the top—and he did just-one-of-the-boys better than the aristocratic Roosevelt could.

After scrawling the answer in shorthand, Charlie asked, "How many ballots d'you think they'll need this time around?"

Farley scowled. That was a serious question. "It won't be a few," he said at last, reluctantly. "But we'll come out on top in the end. People don't care how long the gal's in the delivery room. They just want to see the baby."

Charlie wrote that down, too. Big Jim gave terrific quotes when he kept them clean. Then, spotting Stas Mikoian in the Joe Steele conga line, Charlie hurried after him. The Armenian was another of Steele's campaign stalwarts. They'd met in Fresno, and stuck together after Steele went to Washington.

Mikoian might not have been as clever as Farley, but he was no dope. His brother was one of Donald Douglas' top aeronautical engineers in Long Beach, so brains ran in the family. Dancing along next to him, Charlie asked, "How do things look?"

“We’ll have a long night once the balloting starts,” Mikoian said, echoing Farley’s prediction. “We’ll have a long two or three days, chances are. But we’ll win in the end.”

He sounded as confident as Big Jim. Smart or not, one of them was talking through his hat. In ordinary times, Charlie would have figured Roosevelt had the edge. The Roosevelts had been important while Joe Steele’s folks—and those of most of his aides—were nobodies under the Tsar. FDR served as Assistant Secretary of the Navy when Wilson was President. He’d fought infantile paralysis to a standstill. How could you help admiring somebody like that?

You couldn’t. But these times were far from ordinary. Maybe they needed somebody without history behind him. Maybe Joe Steele’s upstarts had the moxie to go toe-to-toe with the well-tailored guys who’d been finagling since the Year One.

Actually, Stas Mikoian seemed pretty well tailored himself. The straw boater didn’t go with his sober gray suit, but you put on silly stuff like that when you joined a demonstration.

“Count on it,” Mikoian said, dancing all the while and never losing the beat. “Joe Steele’s our next President.”

A sly Armenian. And Lazar Kagan was a sly Hebe. And Vince Scriabin made a plenty sly whatever he was. Were they sly enough to lick FDR and his all-American veterans?

* * *

The chairman rapped loudly for order. Microphones and loudspeakers made the gavel sound like a rifle. “Come to order! The convention will come to order!” the chairman shouted.

Oh, yeah? Charlie thought from his seat in the stands. The floor went on bubbling like a crab boil. You just had to pour in some salt and spices, peel the Democrats out of their shells, and eat ’em before they got cold.

Bang! Bang! “The convention *will* come to order!” the chairman repeated, his voice poised between hope and despair. “The sergeant-at-arms has the authority to evict unruly delegates. Come to order, folks! We’ve got a new President to choose!”

That turned the trick. The delegates’ cheers echoed from the low dome of the ceiling. Somebody on the podium patted the chairman on the back. Beaming, the big shot positioned himself in front of the microphone again. “The secretary will call the roll of the states,” he said in his best dramatic tones, and then stood aside so the secretary could do just that.

Charlie figured the secretary actually knew what he was doing. No one so scrawny and bland and insignificant could have found himself in such an important place unless he did.

He knew the alphabet, and started at the top: “Alabama!”

The leader of the Alabama delegation made his way to the floor microphone. “Mr. Secretary,” he boomed in a drawl thick enough to slice, “the great and sovereign state of Alabama casts the entirety of its voting total for that splendid and honorable American patriot, Senator Hugo D. Black!”

“Alabama casts fifty-seven votes for Senator Black,” the secretary said. It was no coincidence that the Senator was from Alabama. The secretary continued, “Alaska!”

Alaska wasn’t a state. Neither was the Canal Zone or Guam or Hawaii or Puerto Rico or the Virgin Islands or

Washington, D.C. They couldn't vote in the general election. They all could help—a little—in picking who would run.

Down the roll the secretary went. Along with plenty of other spectators, Charlie totted up the first-ballot totals. They'd look good in his story. They wouldn't mean anything, though. Favorite sons like Senator Black still littered the field. They let states wheel and deal to their hearts' content.

At the end of that first ballot, Joe Steele had a twenty-three-vote lead on FDR. At the end of the second, Roosevelt had an eight-vote edge on the California Congressman. After the third, Joe Steele was back in front by thirteen and a half votes.

A half-hour recess followed the third ballot. The gloves came off then. Most states were bound to favorite sons for three ballots, though a few had to stick with them through five. The fourth ballot would start to show where the strength really lay.

Or it would have, had it shown anything. Franklin D. Roosevelt and Joe Steele wound up in a dead heat. Charlie whistled softly to himself. What were the odds of that?

Roosevelt took a tiny lead on the fifth ballot, and lost it on the sixth. Favorite sons bled votes to the two front-runners, though neither had gained a majority, much less two-thirds.

Huey Long stayed in the fight. He had not a delegate from north of the Mason-Dixon Line, but he'd picked up votes from lesser Southern candidates like Hugo Black. The Kingfish could dicker with the bigger fish from Yankeeland. Since he hadn't a prayer of winning the nomination, no one seemed to mind his cutting capers on the convention floor.

Jim Farley paid him a courtesy call. Two ballots later, so did Stas Mikoian. Long preened and posed. Hardly anyone admired him more than he admired himself. He wasn't just Kingfish, not for the duration. He had hopes of being kingmaker, too.

Ballot followed ballot. Tobacco smoke thickened the air. So did the growing fug of badly bathed, sweating pols. Most of the party's anointed were in their shirtsleeves after a while, and most of the shirts had spreading stains at the armpits.

Charlie recorded each count, wondering whether Huey Long's total plus that of one of the major candidates would reach the magic number. It didn't look as though that would happen any time soon, though. Everyone had said Joe Steele and FDR were as close as two rivals could get. For once, everyone seemed to be right.

As if plucking the thought from his mind, another reporter asked, "How many ballots did they need to nominate Davis?"

"A hundred and three," Charlie said with sour satisfaction.

"Christ!" the other man said. "They're liable to do it again. If anything gives Hoover a fighting chance, this is it."

"Yeah. If anything. But nothing does," Charlie replied. The other reporter laughed, as if he were kidding.

They balloted through the night. Gray predawn light showed in the Stadium's small number of small windows—they were there more for decoration than to let the sun shine in. At last, the chairman came up to the microphone and said, "A motion to adjourn till one this afternoon will be favorably entertained. Such a motion is always in order."

Half a dozen men proposed the motion. Several dozen seconded it. It passed by acclamation. Delegates and members of the Fourth Estate staggered out into the muggy morning twilight.

A newsboy hawked copies of the *Chicago Tribune*. He bawled the front-page headline: “No candidate yet!” Charlie didn’t think that would tell the Democratic movers and shakers much they didn’t already know.

He ate bacon and eggs and drank strong coffee at a greasy spoon on the way back to his hotel. Coffee or no, in his room he put his alarm clock too far from the bed for him to kill it without getting up.

* * *

Mike Sullivan didn’t like going up to Albany to cover Governor Roosevelt. He didn’t like *having* to go to Albany to cover FDR. He was an inch taller and two years older than Charlie—two years grumpier, they both liked to say. Mike had a perfectly good apartment in Greenwich Village. As far as he was concerned, if the state of New York had to have a governor and a legislature, it could damn well stash them in New York City, which was where it put everything that mattered.

But no. He had to leave his cat and his girlfriend and come upstate to the front edge of nowhere if he needed to report on Franklin D. Roosevelt. (To him, the middle of nowhere lay about halfway between Syracuse and Rochester.)

Massachusetts did things right. The big city there was Boston, and it was also the state capital. But an amazing number of states, even ones with proper cities, plopped their capitals in towns that barely showed up on the map. Pennsylvania was run from Harrisburg, even though it boasted Philadelphia and Pittsburgh. California had San Francisco and Los Angeles, but it was run from Sacramento. Portland and Seattle didn’t tell Oregon and Washington what to do; Eugene and Olympia did.

The list went on. Tallahassee, Florida. Annapolis, Maryland. Springfield, Illinois. Jefferson City, Missouri. Frankfort, Kentucky. Not one a place you’d visit unless you had to.

Albany met that description. It did to Mike, anyway. It wasn’t a tiny village. It had something like 130,000 people in it. But when you came from a city of 7,000,000, give or take a few, 130,000 were barely enough to notice, even if one of them had a better than decent chance of becoming the next President.

Plenty of reporters camped around the big red-brick State Executive Mansion on the corner of Eagle and Elm. To keep them happy, Roosevelt held a press conference the morning after the Democrats started balloting. The press room was on the ground floor of the Executive Mansion. Despite the electric lamps that lit the chamber and the lectern with the microphone, it seemed to Mike to come straight out of the Victorian age, when the mansion was built. The building’s modern conveniences were, and obviously were, later additions.

Roosevelt already stood behind the lectern when his flunkies let the reporters into the room. With the braces on his legs, he could stand, and even take a halting step or two, but that was it. Somebody would have had to help him into place there. He didn’t care for outsiders to watch him getting helped that way. He and his flunkies *really* didn’t care for anyone photographing him getting helped that way. Mike understood why they didn’t. It made him look weak, which was the last thing anyone aiming for the White House wanted.

“Hello, boys!” Roosevelt said. Mike thought the governor’s rich tenor voice had an accent almost as affected as the cigarette holder jutting from his mouth. Somehow, though, FDR got away with the holder and with the old-boy accent where a lesser man would have been laughed at. Behind the gold frames of his spectacles, his eyes twinkled. “Nothing much to talk about today, is there? Not as though Chicago’s given us any news.”

He got the laugh he'd surely been looking for. "How many ballots do you think it'll take, Governor?" asked a reporter Mike had never seen before—surely an out-of-stater.

"You know, Roy, I haven't even worried about that," FDR said. The men in the press room laughed again, this time in disbelief. Mike chuckled along with everybody else, but he also saw that Roosevelt knew who the reporter was even if he didn't. Roosevelt hardly ever missed that kind of trick—and the attention to detail paid off. Looking wounded but smiling at the same time, the Governor held up a hand. "Honest injun, I haven't. We'll get where we want to go in the end, and nothing else matters."

"Joe Steele will have something to say about that," another newshawk called.

Franklin Roosevelt shrugged. He had broad, strong shoulders. He swam a lot for physical therapy—and, usually where no one could see him, he used crutches. "It's a free country, Grover. He can say whatever he wants. But just because he says it, that doesn't make it so." There was, or seemed to be, a certain edge to his tone.

Hearing that, Mike asked, "What *do* you think of his Four Year Plan, Governor?"

"Ah, Mr. Sullivan." No surprise that Roosevelt knew who Mike was. "What do I think of it? I think he thinks the American people want someone—need someone—to tell them what to do. In some distant European lands, that may perhaps be true. But I am confident that here in the United States we are able to look out for ourselves better than he thinks. I believe my New Deal will let us do that, help us do that, better than anything he's proposed while still cleaning up the mess Mr. Hoover has left us."

Most of the reporters scrawled down the response, probably without thinking about it much. But one of Mike's eyebrows quirked as he wrote. If that wasn't a dig at Joe Steele for coming out of tyrannical Russia, he'd never heard one. It was a polite dig, a well-disguised dig, but a dig all the same. The words behind the words were something like *He doesn't really understand how America works.* Maybe it was true, maybe not. Digs didn't have to be to sting. That Trotsky's modern Russia was even more tyrannical than the one Joe Steele's parents had left only gave it a sharper point.

Quickly, Mike tried a follow-up question: "If you get the nomination, sir, what do you think Joe Steele will do?"

Roosevelt smiled his patrician smile. "He's represented the people of his farm district for a long time now. He can probably get the nomination there again."

After that, nobody asked whether there'd be a place for Joe Steele in a Franklin D. Roosevelt administration. FDR hadn't said *Go back and tend to your raisins* in so many words, but he might as well have. A low hum rose from the press corps, so Mike wasn't the only one who got it. No, Roosevelt didn't love Joe Steele, not even a little bit.

And how did Joe Steele feel about Roosevelt? In Albany, that didn't seem important enough to worry about. The *Post* got a whacking good story, though.

* * *

Moving the alarm clock proved smart: Charlie squashed his hat trying to make the clock shut up. He staggered down the stairs and out the door. He grabbed more java on the way back to the Stadium. By the time he got there, he made a pretty fair ventriloquist's dummy of his real self. *Progress*, he thought.

In the lobby, somebody said, “What I really wanna do is pour a pitcher of ice water over my head.” Charlie was already sweating, and the new session’s politicking hadn’t started. If he’d seen a pitcher of ice water he could have grabbed, he might have done it, suit and cigarettes and notebooks be damned.

At one on the dot, the chairman gaveled the convention to order. “I will summon the secretary, and we shall proceed to the twenty-sixth ballot,” he said.

“Twenty-seventh!” The cry came from several places.

The chairman did summon the secretary, and briefly consulted with him. “The twenty-seventh ballot—excuse me,” he said with a wry grin. “Time flies when you’re having fun.”

They balloted through the night again. In the votes before midnight, Joe Steele forged ahead, a few votes this round, a few more the next. But when the wee smalls rolled around, FDR started gaining again. He kept gaining till the sky lightened once more. This time, Stas Mikoian moved to adjourn.

Roosevelt’s backers didn’t object—they had to eat and drink and sleep (and perhaps even piss and bathe) like anyone else. But they were jubilant as they walked out into the new day. Things finally looked to be rolling their way. The people who liked Joe Steele most seemed glummest.

Charlie shoehorned himself into that diner for another breakfast. At the counter next to him, one delegate said to another, “If Long throws his weight FDR’s way . . .”

“Yeah,” the second man said miserably. “I’d almost sooner keep Hoover than see Huey as VP. Almost.”

“If Huey is, Roosevelt better watch his back but good,” the first fellow said. His buddy nodded. So did Charlie, not that they paid him any mind. Anyone who trusted Huey Long needed to have his head examined—and his life insurance paid up.

One cup of coffee turned into three. Three turned into a trip to the men’s room. The diner had pay phones on one wall of the hallway leading back there. Vince Scriabin fed quarters into a telephone as Charlie walked by: a long-distance call.

There were lines at both urinals. Plenty of Democrats unloaded the coffee they’d taken aboard the past few hours. Charlie waited, then eased himself. He got out of the john as fast as he could; the aroma didn’t make you want to linger.

At the telephone, Scriabin had got through. “Yeah,” he was saying. “Take care of it—tonight. You let it go, it’ll be too late.” He sounded like a politician. Tomorrow was always too late. He added, “That son of a bitch’ll be sorry he ever messed with us.” Then he hung up and headed for the restroom himself.

Anybody thought twice before crossing Joe Steele. Ever since he got on the Fresno city council, he’d been his friends’ best friend and his enemies’ worst enemy. Charlie wondered who was getting paid back now. He also wondered whether Scriabin thought he needed to hurry now because his man trailed. If Roosevelt won, Joe Steele’s revenge wouldn’t be anything to fear so much.

The fight wasn’t over yet, though. FDR had come back to take the lead. Joe Steele could rally, too. Mikoian and Kagan and Scriabin would do everything they knew how to do to make that happen. Charlie wondered if Joe Steele’s men knew enough.

II

They'd be at it again tonight, out there in Chicago. They'd already gone through fifty-odd ballots. You had to wonder whether the Democrats owned a death wish. They claimed they'd run things better than the GOP had. Considering how deep the Depression was, that didn't seem like a high bar to jump. But if they couldn't even settle on a nominee, didn't you have to wonder what kind of job they'd do once they finally wrapped their sweaty palms around the steering wheel?

Some people would say so. Herbert Hoover sure would, as often and as loud as he knew how. But who'd believed Hoover since Wall Street rammed an iceberg and sank on Black Tuesday? Mike Sullivan knew he didn't. Precious few people did.

So here he was in Albany, still keeping tabs on FDR for the *Post*. Reporters from half the papers in the country seemed to be here. They jammed hotels and boardinghouses. They filled the town's indifferent restaurants and technically illicit saloons. They followed one another around, each hoping the next was on to something juicy. They told one another lies over card games and in barber shops.

Roosevelt was coy about the invasion. Except for the press conference, he stayed secluded with Eleanor on the second floor—the living quarters—of the State Executive Mansion. The way it looked to Mike, staying secluded with Eleanor Roosevelt was within shouting distance of a fate worse than death. If you had to seclude yourself, couldn't you at least do it with somebody cute?

Had he been back in New York City, he could have watched the Yankees or the Giants or the Dodgers (well, actually the Giants were out of town). Here, the Albany Senators of the Eastern League were taking on the New Haven Profs at Hawkins Stadium on Broadway in the village of Menands, a couple of miles north of downtown Albany. Ticket prices ran from half a buck in the bleachers to $1.10 for the best seat in the house.

He went to a game that night. Hawkins Stadium had something Yankee Stadium, the Polo Grounds, and Ebbets Field couldn't match. They played baseball under the lights in Albany (um, in Menands). The big leagues didn't want to put them in. This was the first night game Mike had ever seen.

The crowd was somewhere around 4,000—not half bad for a midseason game between two Class A teams going nowhere. The second-division Giants might not have drawn as many. They were so rotten, John McGraw had finally called it a career after thirty years at their helm.

New Haven won the game, 6-4, sending the local fans home unhappy. Mike had no rooting interest in either team. The night game was enough of an attraction all by itself. He looked at his watch as he left the ballpark. Half past ten. He'd walk down Broadway and be back at his hotel a few minutes after eleven. It had a radio in the lobby. He could listen to the bloodletting from Chicago for a while. If they chose Roosevelt there, the new nominee would almost have to make a statement in the morning.

He was nearly to the hotel—just south of the state Capitol, as a matter of fact—when fire-engine sirens started wailing like damned souls. Three of the long red machines roared past him, one after another, their flashing lights warning ordinary cars off the road. Police black-and-whites followed hard on the fire engines' heels.

The engines he saw weren't the only ones he heard, either—nowhere close. Albany had itself a four-alarm fire, sure as the devil. And sure as the devil, he saw the flames ahead, a little farther inland from the Hudson than he was. He started to run. It wasn't the story he'd come to cover, which didn't mean it couldn't be big.

Plenty of people were running toward the fire. "Isn't that the Mansion?" one man called to another.

“’Fraid it is,” the second man said.

“Which mansion?” Mike asked, panting. They said cigarettes played hell with your wind. For once, they knew what they were talking about.

“Executive Mansion. Governor’s mansion. FDR’s mansion,” the two fellows said, not really in chorus. One of them added, “He’s up there on the second floor, how’s he supposed to get out?”

“Jesus Christ!” Mike crossed himself. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d heard Mass or gone to confession, but sometimes what you took for granted when you were a kid came out at the oddest moments.

“Yeah, wouldn’t that screw the pooch?” said one of the guys trotting along with him.

“In spades, doubled and redoubled,” the other one put in.

Landscaped grounds surrounded the Executive Mansion, which stood well back from the street. Some of the trees near the Governor’s residence were on fire, too. But the big two-story building might as well have exploded into flame. Mike couldn’t have got there more than ten minutes after the first sirens began to scream. All the same, fire engulfed the mansion. Anybody could see it would burn to the ground, and soon. Flames taller than a man leaped from almost every window.

Silhouetted against that inferno, the fire engines didn’t look so long and impressive any more. And the streams of water the firemen aimed at the blaze also seemed punier than they should have. Eyeing that, Mike decided it wasn’t his imagination. He shoved his way through the crowd till he found himself standing beside a burly guy in a heavy canvas coat and a broad-brimmed rubber helmet. “Shouldn’t you have got more water pressure than this?” he shouted.

“Most places, yeah, but maybe not around here,” the fireman said. “You gotta remember, everything around here is old as the hills. They built this thing during the Civil War. I bet it didn’t have no plumbing then—just thundermugs and outhouses, and a well to get typhoid from. Even the gas got added on later. And the electricity?” He smacked his forehead with the heel of his right hand.

Mike had noticed the same thing when Roosevelt gave his press conference. “You think that’s how the fire started?” he asked.

“I dunno. However it started, it’s goin’ great guns, ain’t it?” The fireman shrugged broad shoulders. “I don’t gotta figure out what happened. I just gotta try an’ put it out. The how and the what, they’re for the guys from the arson patrol.”

“Was it arson?” Mike demanded.

“I dunno,” the fireman said again. “When one burns this big and this hot, though, we’d poke around even if it was a bunch of empty offices and not the Executive Mansion.”

“Did anybody . . . get caught in the fire?”

The fireman scowled at Mike as if, for the first time, he’d asked a really dumb question. And so he must have, because the man said, “A housemaid got out, and a nigger cook from the kitchen busted a window and jumped out with his pants on fire. Everybody else who was in there . . . Christ have mercy on their souls, that’s all I can tell ya.” As Mike had, he crossed himself.

“Oh, my Lord.” Hearing it that way was like a kick in the belly. “Roosevelt was inside, wasn’t he? Franklin

and Eleanor both, I mean."

"That's what we heard when we rolled, uh-huh." The fireman nodded. "If they were, though, it's gonna take a while to find 'em, on account of all the other shit that's burning, pardon my French. Even when we do, they'll be like charcoal. Sorry, but that's how it is. Won't hardly be enough of 'em left to bury."

I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him. Shakespeare chimed inside Mike's head. Well, FDR would never be Caesar now. "I wasn't thinking about burying them," Mike said, which was half true, anyhow. "I was thinking, now who gets the Democratic nomination?"

Once more, the fireman eyed him as if he were a moron. "Joe Steele does," the man said. "Who else is left now?"

When you asked it like that, the answer was simple. With Franklin D. Roosevelt out of the picture, no one else was left now, no one at all.

* * *

The movement from ballot to ballot at the Chicago Stadium reminded Charlie Sullivan of the Western Front in 1918. You couldn't see much movement from one day to the next then, but after a while the French and English and Americans were always going forward and the Kaiser's boys were always going back. Roosevelt kept moving forward here, and Joe Steele kept falling back. Sooner or later, the trickle would turn to a flood, and retreat to rout. Later was starting to look more and more like sooner, too.

Charlie saw the exact moment when everything changed. A spotty-faced kid tore onto the convention floor at a speed an Olympic sprinter might have envied. He dashed straight for the New York delegation and huddled with Big Jim Farley.

Farley clapped both hands to his head and spun away: an operatic gesture of despair. The anguished bellow he let out might have come straight from grand opera, too. He asked the kid something. The answer he got made him spin away again.

His next shout had words in it: "Mister Chairman! *Mister Chairman!*"

Although the secretary was calling the roll for the umpty-umpth time, the chairman motioned for him to pause. "The chair recognizes the distinguished delegate from New York."

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I—" Jim Farley's chin sagged down to his chest. His voice broke. For a moment, Charlie didn't think he'd be able to go on. Then, visibly gathering himself, Farley did: "Mr. Chairman, I have the inexpressibly sad duty of informing you and the convention that Governor and Mrs. Roosevelt have perished in a quickly spreading fire at the Executive Mansion in Albany. The Governor, of course, was confined to his wheelchair and did not have a chance of escaping the flames."

Delegates on the floor and gawkers in the stand all cried out in horror. Charlie tried to imagine Roosevelt's final moments, trapped in that chair as fire swept over him. Shuddering, he wished he hadn't. The most you could hope for was that it ended pretty fast.

Stas Mikoian and Lazar Kagan were with the rest of the California delegation. They looked as shocked and as devastated as anyone else on the floor, regardless of which candidate he backed. Mikoian in particular went white as a sheet and swayed where he stood. Like a lot of people down there and in the stands, he made the sign of the cross. With a reporter's gift for noting useless details, Charlie saw that he shaped the

horizontal stroke from right to left, not from left to right the way a Roman Catholic would.

Charlie looked around the floor for Vince Scriabin. He couldn't spot Joe Steele's other California henchman. Maybe that was because Scriabin had the kind of face and build you forgot five seconds after you saw them. He seemed so ordinary, he blended into any crowd like a chameleon.

Or maybe Charlie didn't see him because he wasn't there. A chill ran through Charlie as he remembered the chunk of Scriabin's phone call he'd overheard early this morning—or a million years ago, depending on how you looked at things.

Take care of it—tonight, he'd said. *You let it go, it'll be too late.* By the money he fed into the telephone, he was calling long-distance.

Where was he calling, exactly? Who was on the other end of the line? What did Vince want him to take care of? Why might it be too late if that other fellow waited?

The obvious answer Charlie saw scared the piss out of him. He didn't want to believe Joe Steele or his backers could imagine anything like that, much less do it. He had no proof at all, as he knew perfectly well. He didn't even have what anybody would call a suspicion. He had a possibility, a coincidence. Only that, and nothing more.

Some of the moans and groans and cries of grief around him shaped themselves into a different kind of noise inside his head. What it sounded like was a goose walking over his grave.

Vince Scriabin had noticed him, there in the hallway leading back to that greasy spoon's john. How much did Vince think he'd overheard? Would Vince figure he could add two and two and come up with four? If Vince did, what was he liable to do about it?

If this wasn't all moonshine, Scriabin had just arranged to have Joe Steele's main rival roasted all black and crispy, like a ham forgotten in the oven. After that, getting rid of a reporter would be no more than snipping off a loose end. People who knew too much were some of the most inconvenient people in the world.

If this wasn't all moonshine. If Vince Scriabin hadn't been talking about something else altogether. If he had been talking about something else, Charlie was just borrowing trouble. *As if I don't have enough already,* he thought. *Yeah, as if!*

Nobody was going to come after him right this minute. He wasn't sure of much, but he was sure of that. Cautiously, the chairman asked, "Mr. Farley, what do you and your people have in mind for the delegates who have been supporting Governor Roosevelt?"

"We would have liked to continue as we were going, to win the nomination here and to win the White House in November," Farley said, every word full of unshed tears. "Obviously, that . . . will not happen now. Just as obviously, our party still needs to win the general election. This being so, Governor Roosevelt's delegates are released from any pledges they may have made, and are free to follow the dictates of their several consciences."

Before the chairman could say anything or even ply his gavel, one of Huey Long's wheeler-dealers moved for a one-hour recess. He got it; hardly anyone opposed him. He still thought the Kingfish could make headway against Joe Steele, then. Charlie would have bet double eagles against dill pickles that he was nutty as a Christmas fruitcake, but he deserved the chance to try—the chance to fail.

Try the Long backers did. Fail they did, too, gruesomely. The delegates from outside the old Confederacy who wanted to have anything to do with Huey Long didn't make anybody need to take off his shoes to count them. And a Mississippi Congressman who sported buttons for John Nance Garner and Joe Steele waved his cigar and shouted, "How about we win an election for a change, hey?"

That put it in terms even another Congressman could understand. A few minutes after three in the morning, on the convention's sixty-first ballot, West Virginia's votes lifted Joe Steele over the two-thirds mark. Come November, he'd face Hoover.

Blizzards of confetti blew through the Chicago Stadium. Delegates scaled straw hats. Some of them flew for amazing distances. Charlie watched one sail past the chairman's left ear. That worthy, affronted, moved his head a little to avoid the collision.

Charlie wasn't affronted. He was entranced. *If you could make a toy that glided so well, you'd be a millionaire in a month,* he thought. The band played "California, Here I Come" and "You Are My Sunshine."

The enchantment of flying straw hats didn't perk Charlie up for long. Neither did the thought of becoming a millionaire in a month. For once, he couldn't get excited about kicking Herbert Hoover out of Washington in November with a tin can tied to his tail. He wondered if he'd still be alive in a month, let alone in the dim and distant future of November.

* * *

Someone knocked on the door to Charlie's hotel room. Whoever the son of a bitch was, he wouldn't quit, either. Opening one eye a slit, Charlie peered toward the alarm clock ticking on the dresser against the far wall. It was a quarter past eight. To somebody covering a political convention, a knock at this heathen hour felt too much like the midnight visits that brought panic in Trotsky's Russia.

Yawning and cussing at the same time, Charlie lurched to the door. He threw it wide. Whoever was out there, he'd give him a good, jagged piece of his mind.

But he didn't. In the hallway, neatly groomed and dressed, stood Vince Scriabin. The only thing that came out of Charlie's mouth was "Ulp."

"Good morning," Scriabin said, as if they hadn't last seen each other when the fixer was arranging something horrible (unless, of course, he wasn't doing that at all).

"Morning," Charlie managed. It was an improvement on *Ulp*, if only a small one.

"Joe Steele would like to see you in his room in fifteen minutes," Scriabin said. "It's 573." He touched the brim of his homburg, nodded, and walked away.

"Jesus!" Charlie said as he shut the door. His heart thumped like a drum. He'd half—more than half—expected Scriabin to pull a snub-nosed .38 from an inside pocket and fill him full of holes. A—breakfast?—invitation from the candidate? His crystal ball hadn't shown him anything about that.

Gotta get it fixed, he thought vaguely. He had to fix himself up, too, and in a hurry. He stuck a new Gillette Blue Blade in his razor and scraped stubble from his cheeks and chin and upper lip. He threw on some clothes, dragged a comb through his sandy hair, and went down to 573.

When he knocked, Lazar Kagan let him in. The round-faced Jew hadn't shaved yet this morning. "It's a great

day for America," Kagan said.

"I think so, too," Charlie answered. He might have sounded heartier if he hadn't walked past Vince Scriabin at just the wrong moment, but how hearty was anyone likely to sound before he had his coffee?

Joe Steele was sipping from a cup. The pot perked lazily on a hot plate. A tray of scrambled eggs and another full of sausages sat above cans of Sterno. A loaf of bread lay beside a plugged-in toaster.

Scriabin and Mikoian were also there with their boss. No other reporters were. Charlie didn't know whether that was good news or bad. "Congratulations on winning the nomination," he said.

"Thanks. Thanks very much." Joe Steele set down the coffee cup. He came over to shake Charlie's hand. He had a strong grip. He might not be a large man, but his hands were good-sized. "Believe me, Charlie, this is not the way I wanted to do it."

"I guess not!" Charlie exclaimed. Of course the Californian would have wanted to take the prize without anything happening to Franklin D. Roosevelt. He would have wanted to beat the stuffing out of the Governor of New York. He probably wouldn't have been able to do that, but it didn't matter any more.

Joe Steele waved to the spread. "Help yourself to anything," he said.

"Thank you. Don't mind if I do." Charlie wondered if he needed a food taster, the way kings had in the old days. If he did, he had several, because the candidate and his aides had already had some breakfast. Kagan and Joe Steele took more along with Charlie.

After Charlie had had coffee and a cigarette and had got outside of some breakfast, he asked Steele, "What can I do for you this morning?"

The Congressman from California smoked a pipe. Getting it going let him pause before he answered. Charlie watched him—studied him—while he fiddled with it. His face gave away nothing. You could peer into his eyes forever, and all you'd see would be eyes. Whatever was going on behind them, Joe Steele would know and you wouldn't.

After a couple of puffs of smoke floated up to the ceiling, the candidate said, "I wanted to tell you how well you've done, how fair you've been, covering the campaign up till now. I've noticed, believe me."

"I'm glad," Charlie said. When a politician told you you'd been fair, he meant you'd backed him. Well, Charlie had. He'd thought Joe Steele could set the country right if anybody could. He still wanted to think so. It wasn't so easy now, not when he wondered what Vince Scriabin had talked about on that long-distance call.

And when a politician said *Believe me*, you had to have rocks in your head if you did. Any reporter worth the crappy wage he got learned that in a hurry.

Joe Steele looked at Charlie. Looking back, Charlie saw . . . eyes. Eyes and that proud nose and the bushy mustache under it. Whatever Joe Steele was thinking, the façade didn't give it away.

"As long as you keep writing such good stories, no one in my camp will have anything to complain about," the candidate said.

Stas Mikoian grinned. When he had his color, as he did now, his teeth flashed against his dark skin. "Of course, people in political campaigns never complain about the stories reporters write," he said.

“Of course,” Charlie said, with a lopsided smile of his own.

“Well, then,” Joe Steele said. He opened a nightstand drawer and pulled out a squat bottle of amber glass. The writing on the label was not in an alphabet Charlie could read. Steele pulled the cork and poured a slug from the bottle into each coffee cup. Charlie sniffed curiously. Brandy of some kind—apricot, he thought—and strong, unless he missed his guess.

“To winning!” Vince Scriabin said. They clinked cups as if they held wine glasses. Charlie sipped. Yes, even cut with coffee, that stuff would put hair on your chest. It would probably put hair on your chest if you were a girl.

“Winning is the most important thing, yes,” Joe Steele said. His henchmen nodded in unison, almost as if a single will animated the three of them. More slowly, with all of the other men watching him, Charlie followed suit. He didn’t know what he’d expected when Vince Scriabin summoned him here. Or maybe he did know, but he didn’t want to think about it.

Whatever he’d expected, this wasn’t it. This was better. Much better.

* * *

Mike Sullivan didn’t know what he’d done to deserve—or rather, to get stuck with—covering Franklin Roosevelt’s funeral. No, he knew, all right. By accident, he’d covered the Governor’s incineration for the *Post*. Having him at the burial would neatly finish things off. Too many editors thought like that.

Hyde Park was a hamlet on the Hudson, about halfway between New York City and Albany. Roosevelt had been born here. He would go to his eternal rest, and Eleanor with him, behind the house where he’d come into the world.

The house was a mansion. A lot of fancy buildings in Hyde Park were connected to the Roosevelts one way or another. FDR always played down his patrician roots in public. If you were going to go anywhere in politics, you had to act like an ordinary joe, even—maybe especially—if you weren’t. You had to gobble hot dogs, and get mustard all over your face while you did it.

But the people who came to bury Franklin Delano Roosevelt were rich and elegant and proud. They weren’t on constant public display, and weren’t so used to disguising wealth and power. They wore expensive, stylish clothes, somber for the occasion, and wore them well. They stood straight. When they talked, Mike heard more *which*es and *whom*s than he would have in a month of Sundays from hoi polloi, and almost all of them fit the grammar.

When Roosevelt’s relatives and friends talked, Mike also heard, or thought he heard, a certain well-modulated anger and frustration in their voices. They’d been sure one of theirs would get something they felt equally sure he deserved. Now, instead, he was getting what all men got in the end: a plot of earth six feet by three feet by six.

“Can you imagine it?” a handsome young man said to a nice-looking girl whose sculptured features were partly obscured by a black veil. “Now it looks as though that damned raisin picker will be President of the United States.”

“I wouldn’t mind so much if he’d won fair and square at the convention—not that I think he would have,” she answered. “But to have it taken away like this—”

“They say it wasn’t arson,” the young man said.

“They say they can’t prove it was arson,” she corrected him. “It’s not the same thing.”

He clucked in mild reproof. “As long as they can’t prove it, we have to go on as if it wasn’t,” he said. “If we start seeing conspiracies behind every accident, we might as well be living in Mexico or Paraguay or some place like that.”

“But what if the conspiracies are really there?” she asked.

Mike stepped away before he heard the young man’s answer. He didn’t want them to think he was eavesdropping, even if he was. Not hearing how that conversation ended didn’t much matter, anyhow. He listened to bits of half a dozen others not very different before the service started.

The Episcopal bishop presiding over the funeral wore vestments that looked a lot like their Roman Catholic equivalents. Mike had voted for Al Smith in 1928, and knew Charlie had, too. The walloping Hoover gave Smith convinced Mike no Catholic would be elected President in his lifetime, if ever.

Of course, when you looked at how things had turned out under Hoover, you had to wonder how Al Smith could have done worse. It sure wouldn’t have been easy. But here Hoover was, up for a second term. Like so many generals in the Great War, the Republicans seemed to be reinforcing failure.

And here crippled Franklin and homely Eleanor were, side by side in closed coffins because nobody wanted to look at the charred bits the firemen and undertakers thought were their remains. The bishop ignored that as far as he could. As countless clergymen of all denominations had before him and would long after he was dust himself, he took his text from the Book of John: “I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.”

What could you say after that? Anyone who believed it would be consoled. Anyone who didn’t . . . Well, chances were you couldn’t say anything that would console unbelievers. They would say it didn’t mean a goddamn thing, and how were you supposed to tell them they were wrong?

The bishop did his best: “Franklin and Eleanor were snatched away from us all untimely. They might have done great things in this world had they been allowed to remain longer. They were true servants of mankind, and were on the brink of finding ways to serve commensurate with their talents and abilities. But Almighty God, from Whom spring all things, in His ineffable wisdom chose otherwise, and His judgments are true and righteous altogether, blessed be His holy Name.”

“Amen,” murmured the man next to Mike. Mike missed the sonorous Latin of the Catholic graveside service. Just because it was so hard for a layman to understand, it added importance and mystery to the rite. He supposed the Episcopal cleric was doing as well as a man could hope to do when he was stuck with plain old mundane English.

He was if the fire that killed the Roosevelts was a horrible accident, anyhow. If it was something else—if they really might as well have been living in Mexico or Paraguay—that was a different story. Then it wasn’t God’s will being done: it was the will of some rival of Franklin Roosevelt’s.

Or was it? If you honestly believed God’s judgments were true and righteous altogether, wouldn’t you also believe He had placed the impulse to roast FDR to a charcoal briquette in the arsonist’s mind and then allowed the bastard’s plan to succeed? Wouldn’t you believe God had let Roosevelt roast in his wheelchair so the world as a whole could become a better place?

Mike Sullivan couldn't make himself believe any of that. He had trouble thinking any of the mourners, or even the Episcopal bishop, could believe it. Accidents? Yeah, you could blame accidents on God—hell, insurance policies called them "acts of God." Murder? Unh-unh. Murder was a thing that sprang from man, not from God.

"Let us pray for the souls of Franklin and Eleanor," the bishop said, and bowed his head. Along with the mourners and the rest of the reporters, Mike followed suit. He doubted whether prayer would do any good. On the other hand, he didn't see how it could hurt.

Down into the fresh-dug holes that scarred the green, green grass went the two caskets. FDR and Eleanor would lie side by side forever. Whether they would care about it . . . If you believed they would, you also believed they found themselves in a better place now. Mike did his best, and wished his best were better.

Dirt thudded down onto the coffins' lids as the gravediggers started undoing what they'd done. Mike's lips skinned back from his teeth in a soundless snarl. He'd always thought that was the loneliest sound in the world. It left you all by yourself against mortality, and it reminded you mortality always won in the end.

The pretty girl in the black veil spoke to her young man: "Sweet Jesus Christ, but I want a cocktail!" He nodded. If they weren't feeling the same thing Mike was, he would have been amazed.

He took a notebook out of his pocket and scribbled notes that only he and the God Who probably wasn't presiding over this ceremony had any hope of reading. That told the people around him he was a reporter, not one of their prosperous selves. Some moved away from him, as if he carried a nasty, possibly catching disease. Others seemed intrigued.

They were more intrigued when they found out he'd witnessed the fire. "What did you think it was?" asked a middle-aged man whose horsey features put Mike in mind of Eleanor Roosevelt.

Mike could only spread his hands. "It was a heck of a big fire, that's what," he said. "I have no idea what touched it off. I didn't see it start, and I didn't see anybody running away from the Executive Mansion if there was anybody."

"They stole the nomination from Franklin," the horse-faced man said bitterly. "They stole it, and they murdered him. That stinking Rooshan from California, he's the one behind it. He learned from the Reds, I bet."

"Sir, that's the kind of charge it's better not to make unless you can prove it," Mike said.

"How am I supposed to prove it? You do something like that, you'd better be able to cover your tracks," the mourner said. "But I'd sooner see Hoover win again than that Joe Steele so-and-so. Hoover's an idiot, sure, but I never heard he wasn't an honest idiot."

"Don't put Cousin Lou in the paper, please," a svelte blond woman said. "He's terribly upset. We all are, of course, but he's taking it very hard."

"I understand." Mike didn't intend to put those wild charges in his story. He'd meant what he said—unless you could prove them, you were throwing grenades without aiming. Things were bad enough already. He didn't want to make them any worse.

III

As far as Mike Sullivan was concerned, dinner at Hop Sing Chop Suey was like meeting on neutral ground. Stella Morandini laughed when he said so. “You’re right,” she said. “No spaghetti, no ravioli—but no corned beef and cabbage and potatoes, either.”

“There you go, babe.” Mike nodded. “They’ve still got some kind of noodles here, though, so your side’s probably ahead on points.”

“Noodles doused in this waddayacallit? Soy sauce? Forget it, Mike—that’s not Italian.” Stella was a little tiny gal, only an inch or two over five feet. She wasn’t shy about coming out with what she thought, though. That was one of the things that drew Mike to her. He’d never had any use for shrinking violets.

Her folks were from the Old Country. They wanted her to tie the knot with a *paisan*, preferably with one from the village south of Naples they’d come from. Like Mike, Stella was no damn good at doing what other people wanted.

His folks were almost as disgusted that he was going with a dago as hers were that she was dating a mick. They weren’t just as disgusted because they’d been in the States a couple of generations longer—and because Charlie’s fiancée was Jewish. That really gave them something to grouse about.

Stella sipped tea from one of the small, funny handleless cups the chop-suey joint used. It wasn’t as if she might not have gone out with a sheeny or two herself. She was a secretary at a theatrical booking agency, and almost all the guys she worked for were Jews. She didn’t speak much Yiddish, but she’d learned to understand it in self-defense.

Mike waved to the waiter. “Can we have another couple of fried shrimp, please?” he said.

“Sure thing.” The waiter wasn’t Chinese. He was tall and blond and skinny as a soda straw, and he swished. Fruit or not, he was a good waiter. He hustled back to the kitchen and brought them in nothing flat.

Just as he set them down, Charlie and Esther Polgar walked into Hop Sing’s. Mike and Stella both waved; his brother and almost-sister-in-law sat down at the table with them. Esther had wavy red hair and a pointed chin. Her mother and father had brought her to America from Budapest when she was a little girl, bare months before the Great War started.

She grabbed one of the fried shrimp. Charlie snagged the other one. “Of all the nerve!” Mike said in mock indignation.

“Yeah.” Stella wagged a finger at Esther. “Those things aren’t even kosher.”

“They’re delicious, is what they are,” Esther answered.

“We’re gonna need a couple of more fried shrimp,” Mike told the waiter. “And another pot of tea, and more chop suey, too.” He glanced at his brother. “Unless you can make supper out of our scraps. That’s what you get for showing up late.”

“We get to have you watch us while we eat, too,” Charlie said. “Not that we care.”

The waiter hurried back to the kitchen again. He put a lot of hip action into his walk. If he wasn’t careful, the vice squad would land on him like a ton of bricks one of these days. He wasn’t a bad guy—not the sort of queer who annoyed normal people in the hope that they shared his vice. As long as he didn’t, Mike was willing to live and let live.

“Not much been going on since we saw each other last,” Charlie said. His smile lifted only one side of his mouth. “Hardly anything, matter of fact.”

“Joe Steele getting nominated? Roosevelt going up in smoke? Uh-huh—hardly anything,” Mike said.

“You forgot Garner getting the nod for VP,” Charlie said.

“Mm, I guess I did,” Mike said after a little thought. “Wouldn’t you?”

“You guys are terrible,” Esther said. “You’re worse when you’re together, too, ’cause you play off each other.”

“Now that you’re both here, I’ve got a question for the two of you,” Stella said. “The Executive Mansion burning down like it did—do you think that was an accident?”

“I was there, and I still can’t tell you one way or the other. Neither can the arson inspector, and he knows all kinds of things I don’t,” Mike answered. “As long as nobody can prove anything, I think we’ve got to give Joe Steele the benefit of the doubt. Herbert Hoover, too, as long as we’re talking about people who might want to see Roosevelt dead.”

He looked across the table at his brother. Stella and Esther eyed Charlie, too. Charlie kept quiet. He looked down at the crumbs and little grease spots on the plate that had held the fried shrimp. Silence till it got uncomfortable. At last, Esther remarked, “You’re not saying anything, Charlie.”

“I know,” Charlie said.

“How come?”

He started not to say anything again—or some more, depending on how you looked at the language. Then he seemed to change his mind, and made a small production out of lighting a cigarette. After that, he did answer: “Because a bunch of people here may hear me. They’re people I don’t know, people I can’t trust. Maybe after dinner we can find a cozy place, a quiet place. Then . . .” His voice trailed off.

“Do you really think it matters if someone you don’t know overhears you?” Stella asked.

“Yes.” Charlie bit off the single grudged word.

There didn’t seem to be much to say to that. Mike didn’t try to say anything. He watched his brother shovel food into his chowlock . . . much the same way he had himself not long before. Esther ate more sedately. When they got done, Mike threw a dollar bill, a half, and a couple of dimes on the table. The two couples walked out of Hop Sing’s together.

“Where now?” Stella said.

“Back to my place,” Mike replied in tones that brooked no argument. “It’s closest. And I don’t have any spies in there.”

“You hope you don’t,” Charlie said. Mike let that go. It was either let it go or get dragged into an argument that had nothing to do with what he really wanted to hear.

The Village was . . . the Village. A Red stood on a soapbox and harangued a ten-at-night crowd that consisted of three drunks, a hooker, and a yawning cop who seemed much too lazy to oppress the proletariat.

Posters touting Joe Steele and Norman Thomas sprouted like toadstools on walls and fences. Herbert Hoover's backers had posted no bills in this part of town. They saved them for districts where somebody might look at them before he tore them down.

Under a streetlamp, a sad-looking woman in frayed clothes hawked a crate of her worldly goods in lieu of selling herself. Mike thought that was a good idea. She'd get more for the novels and knickknacks and bits of cheap silver plate than she would for her tired, skinny body, and she wouldn't want to slit her wrists come morning.

Mike's apartment was crowded for one. Four made it claustrophobic, especially when three of them started smoking. He didn't care. He had a bottle of moonshine that claimed it was bourbon. It wasn't, but it would light you up. He poured good shots into four glasses that didn't match, added ice cubes, and handed them around.

"Give," he barked at Charlie.

Give his brother did. "I can't prove a damn thing," Charlie finished. "I don't know who Vince Scriabin was talking to, or where the guy was, or what Vince told him to do, or even if he did it. I don't *know* a thing—but I sure do wonder." He finished the rotgut at a gulp, then stared at the glass in astonishment. "Suffering Jesus! That's awful! Gimme another one, will ya?"

Mike handed him the second drink. His own head was whirling, too, more from what he'd heard than from the bad whiskey. "Let me get this straight," he said. "Scriabin calls . . . somebody . . . somewhere. He says to take care of it that night, because waiting would foul it up. And that night the Executive Mansion goes up in smoke."

"That's about the size of it," Charlie agreed. Mike built himself a fresh drink, too. He needed it, no matter how lousy the hooch was.

Stella and Esther were both staring at Charlie. Mike got the idea that Charlie hadn't said anything to Esther about this till now. "You guys are sitting on the biggest story since Booth shot Lincoln," she said. "Maybe since Aaron Burr shot Hamilton. You're just sitting on it."

"Don't blame me," Mike said. "I'm just hearing it now, too."

"I don't know what we're sitting on," Charlie said. "Maybe it's an egg. Maybe it's a china doorknob, and nothing'll ever hatch out of it. For all I can prove, Scriabin has a bookie in California who's giving him grief." He took another healthy swig from the glass. "I ever say they call Vince the Hammer?"

"Tough guy, huh?" Stella said.

Charlie shook his head. "He looks like a pencil-necked bookkeeper. A bruiser with that kind of handle, he's gonna be bad news, sure. But a scrawny little guy like Scriabin? You call *him* the Hammer, you can bet he'll be ten times worse than the heavyweight."

"You're scared," Mike said in wonder.

"You bet I am!" his brother said. "If you ever had anything to do with Scriabin, you would be, too. If I write a story that says he did this and that, 'cause Joe Steele told him to, it's bad enough if he comes after me 'cause I'm wrong. If he comes after me 'cause I'm right . . . Way I've got things set up now, you and Esther split my life insurance."

“I don’t want your life insurance!” Esther said.

“Me, neither,” Mike added.

“I wouldn’t want it, either. It comes to about fifteen bucks apiece for you guys,” Charlie said. “But that’s where we are. Joe Steele’s gonna be the next President unless he gets hit by lightning or something. But there’s at least a chance that’s because he fried Franklin and Eleanor like a couple of pork chops.”

Stella thrust her glass at Mike. “Make me another drink, too.” Esther held hers out as well.

They killed that bottle, and another one that claimed it was scotch. Mike felt awful in the morning, and the hangover was the least of it.

* * *

The first Tuesday after the first Monday in November. Charlie wondered how and why the Founding Fathers had chosen that particular day to hold a Presidential election. For most of the time since the Civil War, America had been a reliably Republican country. It had been. By all the signs, it wasn’t any more. The polls back East had closed. Joe Steele and the Democrats held commanding leads almost everywhere. They were taking states they hadn’t won in living memory. And it wasn’t just Joe Steele trouncing Herbert Hoover. Steele had coattails.

The Congress that came in with Hoover four years earlier had 270 Republicans and only 165 Democrats and Farmer-Labor men in the House, fifty-six Republicans and forty Democrats and Farmer-Labor men in the Senate. The one that came in two years later, after the Depression crashed down, was perfectly split in the Senate, while the Democrats and their Minnesota allies owned a minuscule one-vote edge in the House.

This one . . . Not all the votes were counted, of course. But it looked as if the Democrats and the Farmer-Labor Party would dominate the House by better than two to one, maybe close to three to one. Their majority in the Senate wouldn’t be so enormous: only one Senator in three was running this year. They’d have a majority, though, and a big one.

And so the victory party at the Fresno Memorial Auditorium was going full blast. The auditorium, built to commemorate the dead from the Great War, was hardly out of its box—it had opened earlier in the year. It was concrete and modern, all sharp angles, with nods to the classical style in the square columns that made up the main entranceway. For a town of just over 50,000, it was huge: it took up a whole city block.

Up on the balcony of the auditorium was the Fresno County Historical Museum. Charlie didn’t see a lot of people going up there. The ones who did were mostly couples of courting age. He wasn’t sure, but he would have bet they were more interested in finding privacy than in looking over gold-mining equipment from seventy-five years before.

Down on the main floor, a band that looked to be full of Armenians played jazz. Straight off of Bourbon Street, it wasn’t. Charlie wondered what a colored fellow from New Orleans would have thought of it. Not much, he figured. But the musicians did the best they could, and the campaign workers cutting a rug weren’t complaining.

That might have been because of the punch filling half a dozen big cut-glass bowls. Joe Steele had said he favored repealing the Eighteenth Amendment. Prohibition was on the way out, but remained officially in effect. That punch had fruit juice in it for cosmetic purposes. Fruit juice or not, though, it was damn near strong enough to run an auto engine.

A Democratic State Senator came to the microphone to announce a Democratic Congressional victory in Colorado. The people who'd come for politics and not just a good time let out a cheer. The others went on dancing and drinking.

A few minutes later, another California politico stepped up to the mike. "Ladies and gentlemen!" he shouted. "Ladies and gentlemen!" He sounded as if he were announcing the Friday night fights. "Ladies and gentlemen, it is my great privilege and distinct honor to introduce to you the Vice President–elect of the United States, John Nance Garner of the great state of Texas!"

More people cheered as Garner shambled up to the microphone. Controlling the Texas delegation had won him the second spot on the ticket, even if he couldn't parlay it all the way to the top. His bulbous red nose said that not all the stories about his drinking habits were lies from his enemies.

He had big, knobby hands, the hands of a man who'd worked hard all his life. He held them up in triumph now. "Friends, we went and did it!" he shouted, his drawl thick as barbecue sauce. "Herbert Hoover can go and do whatever he pleases from here on out, 'cause he won't be doing it to America any more!"

He got a real hand then, and basked in it like an old soft-shelled turtle basking on a rock in the sun. "Now we're gonna do it to America!" shouted someone else who'd taken a good deal of antifreeze on board.

"That's right!" Garner began. Then he caught himself and shook his head. "No, doggone it! That's *not* right. We're gonna do things for America, not to it. You wait and see, folks. You won't recognize this place once Joe Steele gets to work on it."

They cheered him again, even though you could take that more than one way. As if by magic, Stas Mikoian materialized alongside Charlie. "Joe Steele will speak in a little while," he said. "He'll take away whatever bad taste that drunken old fool leaves behind."

"When you win so big, nothing leaves a bad taste," Charlie said. He couldn't ask Mikoian what he knew about Franklin Roosevelt's untimely demise. He was sure Mikoian didn't know anything. Nobody who did know could have turned so pale on the convention floor in July.

Charlie looked around for Vince Scriabin. He didn't see Joe Steele's Hammer. Asking Scriabin that question might bring out an interesting answer. Or it might be the last really dumb thing Charlie ever got a chance to do. Not seeing him might be good luck rather than bad.

Or I might be imagining things, making up a story where there isn't one. Charlie had been trying to convince himself of the same thing ever since the convention. On good days, he managed to do it for a little while. On bad days, he couldn't come close. On bad days, he told himself it wouldn't matter once Joe Steele took the oath of office. Now he had to hope he was right.

* * *

Mike Sullivan stood on the White House lawn, waiting for Herbert Hoover and Joe Steele to come out and ride together to the new President's inauguration. It was almost warm and almost spring: Saturday, March 4, 1933. The lawn still looked winter brown; only a few shoots of new green grass pushed up through the old dead stuff.

This was the last time a President would take office five months after he won the election. The states had just ratified the Twentieth Amendment. From now on, January 20 would become Inauguration Day. Winter for sure then, not that it was usually so bad down here in Washington. With telephones and radio, with trains and

cars and even planes, things moved faster than they had when the Founding Fathers first framed the Constitution.

A military band struck up the national anthem. As if he were at a baseball game, Mike took off his hat and held it over his heart. A door opened on the White House's column-fronted entrance. The President and the President-elect walked out side by side.

Hoover, a big man, stood several inches taller than Joe Steele. He didn't tower over his successor by quite so much as Mike had thought he would. Had Joe Steele put lifts in his shoes? If he had, they were good ones; Mike couldn't be sure at a glance, the way you could with a lot of elevator oxfords.

One thing that did make Hoover seem taller was his black silk top hat. He also wore white tie and a tailcoat. He might have been an Allied leader dictating terms to defeated Germany at Versailles in 1919. Or he might have been one of the European diplomats who dickered the Treaty of Berlin between Russia and Turkey forty years earlier.

Joe Steele, by contrast, was unmistakably a man of the twentieth century, not the nineteenth. Yes, he had on a black suit and a white shirt, but they were the kind of clothes a druggist might have worn to dinner. The shirt's collar was stand-and-fall; it wasn't a wing collar. He wore a plain black necktie, not a fancy white bow tie. And on his head sat not a topper, not even a fedora, but a gray herringbone tweed cap.

Hoover's clothes said *I'm important. I have money. I tell other people what to do.* Joe Steele's outfit delivered the opposite message, and delivered it loud and clear. His suit said *I'm an ordinary guy. I'm getting dressed up because I have to.* Wearing a cloth cap with the suit added *But I don't think it's all that important even so.*

All around Mike, people gasped when they saw what the new President had chosen to put on. "Shameful!" somebody muttered. "No, he has no shame," someone else replied. Mike chuckled to himself. If those reporters weren't a couple of old-guard Republicans from somewhere like Philadelphia or Boston, he would have been surprised. Whenever folks like that deigned to notice the world changing around them, they, like Queen Victoria, were Not Amused.

Well, Queen Victoria had been dead for a long time now. He wondered whether the rock-ribbed (and rock-headed) GOP stalwarts had noticed yet.

Photographers snapped away. Flash bulbs popped. Joe Steele genially touched the brim of his scandalous cap. Hoover looked as if he were sucking on a lemon. He'd looked that way in every photo of him taken since November that Mike had seen.

Behind the men came their wives. Lou Hoover had been the only woman majoring in geology at Stanford while Herbert Hoover studied there. She remained a handsome woman forty years later, and wore a gown in which she might have greeted the King and Queen of England. Betty Steele's dress looked as if it came from the Montgomery Ward catalogue—from one of the nicer pages there, but still. . . . Any middle-aged, middle-class woman with some small sense of style could have chosen and afforded it.

She looked less happy than she might have. From what Charlie had heard, she often did. She and Joe Steele had lost two young children to diphtheria within days of each other, and never had any more. He poured his energy into politics after that. She didn't seem to have much.

More photographs recorded the outgoing and incoming First Ladies for posterity. No one close enough for Mike to overhear sneered about Betty Steele's clothes. People had used up their indignation on her husband.

The two Presidential couples got into a long open car for the ride to the swearing-in ceremony on the Mall. Reporters and photographers scrambled for the cars that would follow the fancy limousine to the formal inauguration. No one reserved seats in those; getting aboard reminded Mike of a rugby scrum. He managed to grab a seat next to the driver of a Model A. He felt like a tinned sardine, but at least he could go on.

Smoke rose from small fires in Lafayette Park, across the street from the White House. People who had nowhere else to live made encampments there. No doubt they hoped it gave the President something to think about when he looked out the window. By all the things Hoover hadn't done in his unhappy term, he didn't look out that window very often.

The Bonus Army had camped in several places near the Mall till Hoover ordered General MacArthur to clear them out. Clear them the Army did, with fire and bayonets and tear gas. Anyone who wasn't rich sympathized with the hapless victims, not with their oppressors in uniform. Hoover seemed to have done everything he could to dig his own political grave and jump on in.

What about Roosevelt? Mike wondered for the thousandth time. The arson inspector didn't say the Executive Mansion had had help burning down. He didn't say it hadn't. He said he couldn't prove it had. Charlie had tried to run down phone records to see if Vince Scriabin was talking to anybody in Albany early that morning. No matter how much cash he spread around, he had no luck. Those records "weren't available." Had someone made them disappear? If anyone had, nobody who knew would say so. Another dead end—as dead as FDR.

Crowds lined the streets to watch the new man in the White House go by. Some of the people in the crowd were the lawyers and talkers who catered to Congress—and to whom Congress had always catered. Money talked in Washington, the same as it did everywhere else. Money talked louder in Washington than it did in a lot of other places, to tell you the truth.

Mike could recognize *those* people right away. They mostly didn't dress as fancy as Herbert and Lou Hoover. They didn't, but they could have. The quality of a haircut, the cut of a suit jacket, the glint of real gold links when somebody shot a cuff . . . Mike knew the signs, sure as hell.

Most of the people who watched Joe Steele go to take the oath, though, were the ordinary folks who made Washington run. Butchers, bakers, waitresses, secretaries, sign-painters, cake decorators, housewives—people like that were out in force. Since it was Saturday, lots of them had brought their kids along so they could say they'd seen a President once upon a time.

Some of the people in the crowd were colored. Washington had rich colored folks, but most of them were even poorer than the whites. They cleaned and kept house for the city's prosperous whites, and raised their children for them, too. No Jim Crow laws on the sidewalks. They could mix and mingle with the folks who thought they were their betters—as long as they stayed polite about it, of course.

Plenty of people on the sidewalk were out of work. Mike knew the signs: the shabby clothes, the bad shaves, most of all the pinched mouths and worried eyes. Unemployment stalked whites and Negroes alike. It brought its own odd kind of equality: when you didn't have a job, everybody who did was better off than you were. A rising tide might lift all boats. The ebbing tide in America since Wall Street crashed had left millions of boats stranded on the beach.

Colored men and women who were out of work eyed Joe Steele with a painful kind of hope: painful not least because hope was something they'd been scared to feel and even more scared to show. But he was different from Hoover. He'd made them believe their worries were his worries, not just unpleasant noises in another room. If that turned out to be one more lie, chances were they wouldn't just be disappointed. They'd be

furious.

That same mix of people, rich and poor, white and black, packed the temporary bleachers on the Mall. Some construction firm or another had given day laborers work to run them up. Those same workers, or a different set, would get paid to knock them down after the ceremony ended.

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