

It was just like the cold, impersonal federal butter knife to guarantee continued income for people like Harcourt—who would find pleasure in its forfeiture—and furlough the very people who needed a salary most, like Chloe and Teague.

“How long’s this going to last?” Chloe asked Dvorak.

“Until Congress settles the budget impasse.”

“Then it might never be lifted.”

“That’s true.”

“I have a mortgage to pay,” Teague said.

“Let me guess,” Dvorak said. “You also have children to feed.”

“It’s not a matter of choice, Dvorak. What will the government do for the employees who can’t meet their home loans as a result of this?”

“Same thing they’re doing for ordinary Americans affected by the recession.”

“But ordinary Americans aren’t being furloughed by the government,” Chloe said.

“They’re not being scapegoated,” Teague said.

“Relax. You’ll take a few weeks off, spend some time with the kids, then get your back pay. Actually, it’s a sweet deal. You of all people should be happy about it, Teague.”

“Not if I lose my house and get bad credit in the mean time.”

“Not if I have to cancel my wedding and default on my deposits,” Chloe said.

“These kinds of things aren’t happening to ordinary Americans.”

“And so you’re not ordinary Americans, Missy Ms. White Wedding. You are exceptional Americans—though no more exceptional than anyone else in this office. That tenet remains central to The Way Forward.”

“Speaking of exceptional, Dvorak,” Teague said. “I thought the office planned to implement a fair-share rotation of furloughs.”

“That’s right,” Chloe said. “I don’t see you on the list to be furloughed.”

“You are referring to the policy of my predecessor.”

“You can say his name, Dvorak. He isn’t going to appear at the sound of it and bite you.”

“My predecessor is no longer here,” Dvorak replied. “That’s what makes him my predecessor.”

“But even Marci approved the idea.”

“Marci was listening to my predecessor, and my predecessor was wrong. He suffered from a severe inability to lead. My position is considered essential. Someone has to be here to manage the fair rationing and rotation of furloughed staff.”

“But not contractors.”

“No. They’ll keep working.”

“And not interns.”

“No.”

“And not managers.”

“Right.”

“Then how do you decide? How do you arrive at your fair decision and fair rotation?”

“For starters, I’ve swung the axe against those positions that

would cause us the least disruption. So all the vacancies are hereby furloughed.”

“How much did that save us?”

“It saved us nothing, but that is beside the point. It was a swift, powerful management action for which I will be credited. So while it cost the office nothing, it earned the office a great deal of credit.”

Teague threw up his hands. “Your non-action against non-essential staff.”

“What did you do next, Dvorak?” Chloe asked.

“Next I looked at everything in this office that’s either duplicate or otherwise can be shared. And since you and Teague each have interns working under you, it was pretty easy to find you replaceable. One of you will begin rotating into furlough at the pay period beginning on Monday.”

Chloe and Teague looked at each other. Each knew what the other had at stake: Chloe her wedding and deposits, Teague his children and his mortgage. Harcourt watched in great anticipation of a fight. Dvorak looked on, impassive. Either way was victory for him. Teague spoke first, softly.

“Chloe, I’d hate for you to ruin your wedding day. I’ll take the first pay period off—maybe it’ll be over by the time I return. I should be able to deal with a short furlough, financially. I can always borrow more, or seek more credit. You’ll only have one wedding.”

“No, no,” Chloe said. “You have children. Let me be furloughed first. For William and Henry.”

They went back and forth like that for a while, until Harcourt got bored and Dvorak began to fume with annoyance.

“Will the two of you just decide, already?!”

“Its him/It’s her,” they said at once.

“That’s it,” Dvorak said. “You’re going to settle this. You’re going to play rock, paper, scissors. Best of five wins.”

Teague won the first game by crushing Chloe’s scissors with a rock. Then Chloe cut up Teague’s paper despite her damaged scissors, and Harcourt made a heartless comment about LaRhonda getting upset about damaged supplies. Teague, inspired by the endless supply of paper being shredded in the no-water room, won the next two matches by folding Chloe’s rocks into nice fresh sheets of printer paper.

He looked relieved, at first, then ashamed. Chloe brought her fist to her chin and rested it there. I could see she was calculating the impact on her wedding. Teague’s shame soon turned to doom, a doom in his eyes, a doom that knew congress for what it was, a doom suggesting that while he might have avoided the cardboard box for another two weeks, the axe would swing his way, eventually. A doom that said even though he had won for now, his victory was fleeting and none of us would emerge from this without bloodied hands.