

## Chapter Five

### *The Colosseum*

Joe was completely exhausted as he got out of the shower in his room at the Agape Lodge. It was an impressive, brand-new hotel on the grounds of Agape Valley. The organization bought the land five years ago in a cost saving move by the State of North Carolina or so the public was told. The truth is that there simply is not enough undeveloped land left anywhere scenic in the country, much less the South, to suit Agape's purposes. Prior to the acquisition this land was a State Park with rundown facilities that had progressed to a state of dereliction. Agape graciously took it off the government's hands under the condition that the area would still be kept accessible for free use by the public. The organization kept its word, but after the property was developed with new signage and security booths, everyone assumed they were not permitted on this now private property unless it was to attend an Agape event. The fact that there were no signs affirming such a conclusion was irrelevant.

After an expedited court battle, thanks to numerous judges up for re-election and reliant on Hughes Foundation campaign contributions, it was determined that Agape's acquisition of public lands was constitutional because it was a non-profit organization and thus the change of ownership would not benefit any private interest at the public's expense. Conservative politicians throughout the country were now campaigning on the "success" of Agape Valley as a model for privatizing State and National Parks.

Ashley usually had the large-scale mission visions for the organization, but this one was all Joe's. After the first phase of construction was completed even she had to admit it was a good idea. The property was a massive fifteen thousand acres, which included a large lake, which was renamed Lake Purity after Agape Valley opened. Next to the lake stood the newly constructed Agape Lodge. The term "lodge" was an affectation to reflect the property's "natural" mountain setting, but the building in fact was an enormous hotel with enough conference room space to accommodate numerous events simultaneously. There was even a wedding chapel that was booked solid for eighteen months in advance.

Scattered around Lake Purity were numerous cabins to support summer camps and youth retreats. The girls' cabins were on the north shore of the lake, the boys on the south. The breadth of the lake was such that it was easily traversable by approved ferry boats that traveled between the docks but would be too long for a swim or paddle boat by the more reckless campers.

However, the crown jewel of Agape Valley was the Agape Colosseum. The building was a scale model of the Flavian Colosseum in its original glory. Ashley wanted the symbolism of converting the place of Christian persecution into a grand church. She never bothered to learn that the tropes of Christians being hunted and constantly thrown to the lions indeed had its root in early Byzantine propaganda but was largely an invention of twentieth century Hollywood. While it is true Nero blamed the great fire of 64 CE on the Christians (a likely

cover for prime land-clearing arson on his part) history shows no campaign of persecution perpetrated against the Christians. No more than any other civilization the Romans crushed at any rate.

The myth of Christian persecution in the first century served as powerful propaganda in the twenty-first century. The people who poured into the Agape Colosseum wanted to tie themselves to their martyr ancestors standing up to oppression. To that end, the construction of the new Colosseum was altered in a significant way from the original. The building was separated down the middle by a grand walkway that extended from a large promenade at the entrance of the building. The grand aisle ran downstairs all the way through the floor seating to the altar and the stage. The Colosseum had been transformed into a giant outdoor cathedral.

In the construction of the Colosseum the organization decided to clear out a few hundred acres of forest so the path to the stadium could accommodate the large crowds. The planners assured Joe that these were not even original trees. They had likely been planted there about a hundred years ago when the original settlers cleared out this land for their buildings and crops. Moreover, they testified to that fact in the environmental impact hearings for the building permits. As Joe noted frequently in interviews on the subject, they had only built impervious structures on less than a fourth of the property. The rest, over 11,000 acres, was still wooded lands open to the public for hiking, fellowship, and prayer.

Today was the culminating event for the Tenth Annual Agape Camp Meeting. Every year members of the Agape network came to Agape Valley and camped out in RVs and tents for a weeklong revival with concerts and shows every night at the Colosseum. Fortunately, the executive director of the country's largest mixed martial arts competition was an Agape board member and decided to hold their championship event, MMA DOMINATION, as the penultimate event at the Colosseum the night before.

The crowd that remained from DOMINATION was massive and tonight would be Joe's most important speech before the primary vote on Tuesday. Every square inch of the field next to the Colosseum was filled with RVs, tents, and even several primitive campsites set up by their survivalist members. Joe spent the entire day, glad-handing, fielding questions by campfires, sampling camp cooking, and stopping for numerous prayer meetings. He was in the shower for nearly an hour trying to get the smell of sweat and campfire out of his hair.

Ashley had been planning this event for over a year. In fact, the planning started right after she determined that Joe would be a perfect candidate for the seat opening up by the retiring Senator Adlai Roberts. Notably, Senator Roberts held the seat for an unprecedented eight terms and he graciously agreed to introduce Joe and give him his endorsement before his speech.

Joe was not without concern about this plan as it was well known that Senator Roberts was a high-ranking member of the ku klux klan in his youth and had frequently expressed his concern about the "wetbacks" invading North Carolina to his staff. For their part his staff assured Joe's campaign that they would spend the afternoon reminding the Senator that "José"

was not really a Mexican and that he was the son of his single largest campaign contributor for years. Yet, this assurance certainly did not allay Joe's concerns.

Ashley's plan was to enter the stadium after Joe's speech ended and join him on stage. It would be a surprise to the crowd who knew she was in Washington, D.C. earlier in the day taping her show. That way she would not upstage Joe and her entrance would be a touching message of support to the crowd. Joe was, of course, unconvinced that Ashley's motivations were as selfless as she claimed, but since he realized this was her maximum form of asceticism he decided, as usual, not to cross her.

Now that the time to execute these plans was nearly upon him, Joe was having a minor panic attack after emerging from his long shower. To his great dismay, he could no longer comfortably button his suit jacket. He thought about picking out a different suit, but he knew the stylists had selected this one to coordinate with Ashley's dress and upsetting those plans would be disastrous. Despite the fact that it had been four hours since he ate and he probably lost half a gallon of sweat working his way through the campground he still thought about taking a laxative to see if that would help clear things out a bit so he could fit into the jacket. Wisely, he decided that fainting and shitting himself in front of tens of thousands of people would not be much better. The choice was made then to go without buttoning the jacket and hope Ashley would not notice, vain hope though it was. Goddamn campaign food.

After pacing for twenty angst ridden minutes, his aide appeared at his door to walk him down to the motorcade. As Joe walked down to the line of black SUVs parked in front of the hotel the whole thing struck him as ridiculous. Did he really have to engage in this presidential cosplay to drive two miles? But Ashley knew what she was doing.

She was right that the motorcade had the desired effect of drawing attention. The procession had a State Trooper motorcycle escort at the front and end of the line even though there were no traffic lights to handle on the route to the Colosseum. Each vehicle was flying two small flags: the American flag on the driver's side fender and the Agape ichthys flag on the passenger's side.

Ashley thought of every detail in her preparations. For example, Joe thought that he should be in a different vehicle from the rest of the entourage, but Ashley knew better. By driving in identical SUVs the people they passed tried to see past the tint on each one and debated about which one actually contained their candidate. This show had the desired effect and the parade drew huge cheers from the crowds of people lining up outside in the heat to prepare for the entry procession. Every one of them yelled "Vamos José" without a glint of Spanish inflection as he rode by.

No expense was spared for the decorations either. All of the lampposts lining the road had been adorned with a simple red banner with the white ichthys symbol at the center and when Joe drew in sight of the Colosseum, he was impressed that the top level had been draped with the same banners. They were massive. Like the original Colosseum, the outer structure of the building had three levels of columns separated by arches. Each banner was the width

of two arches and was separated from the next banner by two arches and stretched from the top of the arches on the top level to the top of the arches on the first level.

The ichthys was everywhere in the crowd. Most wore the red ball cap, but there was an assortment of bandanas, flags, and t-shirts all bearing the symbol. The suit-wearing VIPs all had to have the symbol on their lapel pins. But, while there was an assortment of different items, the coloration and patterns did not change. Every symbol was a white ichthys on a red background. People that had an old gold or silver fish pen they thought would do were encouraged to remember the meaning of the symbol. The red background represented the blood of Christ and all the Christian martyrs who gave their lives to build the kingdom. The white of the ichthys represented the purity of the Christian society they were now building. No one altered the symbol if they were true supporters of the cause. Nor would they purchase merch that was not officially licensed by Agape if they were true believers.

Joe's motorcade pulled up to the grand promenade at the front of the building which the Agapeans called "the Narthex." Before his arrival the organizers positioned crowds along the parking area so he could exit to cheers as he walked inside. Once there Agape's young event coordinator, Stacey Levesque, met Joe at the entrance.

"Welcome Mr. Future Senator," she said extending her right hand for a firm handshake while flipping her long red hair off her shoulder with the left.

"Ah, I'm still just José," Joe said with rehearsed modesty.

"Want to take a look at what we've done for the big night?" she said with a bright smile eager to finally have facetime with the candidate to show off the fruits of her labors.

"Lead the way," Joe replied with his best broad Senator smile and Stacey led them inside.

The banners on the exterior of the building were matched with banners hanging from the interior of the top level. Of course, they were smaller so as not to obstruct the views of people sitting up there but they were no less impressive. Down the center of the aisle a gigantic red carpet had been installed down the main stairs running the entire aisle to the altar and the color matched the color of the banners exactly.

Joe asked if the banners and carpet were permanent installations. Stacey responded, "oh no. They would not hold up to the elements and wear long term. These were designed to only be brought out for the most important events."

Joe thought of the hundreds of people who worked to set all of this up for a single night and wondered if they felt any resentment for the brevity of the event. He did not have much time to ruminate on this matter because his attention was drawn to the stage in front of him. There were two massive new ultra high-definition screens on either side of the stage. Behind the pulpit stood a line of dozens of flags. The American flag and the Agape banner were arranged in sequence on stands forming the backdrop for the speaker. Above these flags over the pulpit, between the two screens, were two giant intertwined outstretch flags. Again, the American flag and the Agape banner were fused together over the speaker's head.

With the stage set it was time for the event to begin. Stacey's projections indicated that it should take thirty-six to forty-two minutes to get the crowd seated, another four to six minutes for the ancient, handsy Senator to traverse the twenty yards from the green room to the stage (double that time if there were any attractive women under the age of thirty backstage), five to seven minutes to give what should be a two-minute introduction, and Mr. Hughes would need ten minutes to give his opening before Ashley's show began precisely at 9 p.m. It was already 7:46 and she really did not have the time to give Joe a moment to "take it all in" so she started pacing and looking at her watch every five seconds.

Joe picked up on the cue and welcomed it. He had only stopped to admire the décor because they seemed so proud of it and thought this was a designed moment for the campaign website. He was ready to get out of the heat and the only divine intervention he sought was to miraculously lose ten pounds so his suit jacket would button again. He clapped his hands together and said, "well, I guess it's time we got started."

With that Stacey burst forth like a racehorse out of the gate and practically pushed Joe the remaining fifty yards through the floor seating area. When they were in sight of the stage, she signaled the production manager that it was time to begin.

The production crew snapped into action. Thousands of people had been waiting in the sun all day for a chance to say they were in the building and now they had to be moved inside. Ashley wanted the expectation and wanted the crowd to feel like they were walking into a grand American event. As the upper bowl filled in, the background music was what the event planners called "classy Americana;" Gershwin, Copeland, and various other turn of the century brass band pomp.

Backstage Joe joined the Golden Eagle Elite donors and had just finished the photos. The panic became more difficult to contain by this point. He knew Ashley would soon see pictures of him with an open jacket shaking hands with the big shots and his pulse quickened with this worry. As quick cover he thought putting his arms around their shoulders instead of a handshake would help hide the situation and it turned out to be a big hit.

Mazzy Gladstone, the billionaire dowager, who miraculously clinged to life although everyone was certain she must be a hundred and fifty by now, remarked "it's so good to see a man who isn't afraid to put his arms around a woman. I'm so sick of this "Me Too" garbage. In my day respectable ladies knew not to put themselves in a really bad situation and if a man got a little feel in there now and again, well we just knew we were doing something right!"

By this point the sky had darkened sufficiently to begin the procession into the lower bowl and floor seating area. This procession was organized into several groups that followed a banner down the aisle. One banner on each side broke off left and right as they reached their section and continued to fill up the lower bowl and down to the floor seating. Everyone was carrying small electric candles which enhanced the cascading effect of the crowd as it moved down the stairs.

Each banner was in a vertical orientation on a long pole carried by the standard bearer and each banner was the same. The bearer held the Agape red banner with the white ichthys

in the center. However, the marching banners had the word “AMERICA” at the top and “WAKE UP” at the bottom.

To enhance the visuals of the group movements, the organizing committee played marches as the crowd moved in. Ashley insisted on Sousa to sell the crowd on the classic American patriotism theme. However, she wanted his “lesser known” marches to be played. The selections began with “Crusader” then moved into “The Thunderer.” The third theme was “The Liberty Bell” and Joe burst into laughter. He looked around, but no one else in the VIP room saw the humor in it and his laughter was quelched.

A panicked Stacey came up to him after a few seconds and said, “Mr. Hughes what made you laugh?”

Joe lightly responded, “oh, you know, the Monty Python song. I thought it was a joke.”

The blood rushed from Stacey’s face and she frantically flipped pages on her clipboard, “no, no, I’m sorry Mr. Hughes. I... I... all of these songs are from John Philip Sousa. I promise. I don’t know who Monty Python is. I had all of these checked. They are all Sousa. Maybe...”

Joe interrupted her, “Stacey, no don’t worry about it. Monty Python was a British sketch comedy show from the early 70s and that was their theme song.” Joe was met with a blank stare. “You’ve probably seen it. It has the silly British propaganda posters turned into an absurd cartoon. Then it ends with that foot stomping on them and a fart noise.” Joe chuckled to try to lighten the mood.

Stacey saw her career evaporate in the blink of an eye. She was twenty-seven years old and had never heard of this British show that was on television when her parents were babies. Nonetheless, if Ashley associated her procession with a “fart noise,” she knew she would never get another opportunity like this again.

Joe tried to reassure her. “Stacey, I promise you, no one else noticed. I’m just weird. Really, this is the single most amazing political event I have ever been to. I just hope I can live up to the hype. People are going to be talking about this night for years.” He then put his hand on her shoulder and she met his reassuring gaze causing her fear to evaporate.

“Oh José, you have already. I just think you’re... oh goodness Mr. Hughes. I’m so sorry I didn’t mean to call you by your first name. I just...”

He just smiled and said, “Stacey... relax. Let’s enjoy your show. It’s almost time!”

As he said that the last march, “King Cotton” began and the Platinum Elite members began to fill up the final floor section in front of the altar. Mazzy began the chorus of the billionaires scoffing at the multimillionaires. “Sure glad I ain’t down there in that heat walkin’ all that way. I couldn’t stand it” she said in between bites of the lamp chop she was holding from her hors d’oeuvre plate. The others grunted approvingly between mouthfuls.

Joe gave Stacey one more pat on the shoulder and walked to the door. “Wish me good luck everyone!” he exclaimed.

In response Mazzy held her chop aloft and with a half mouthful of food yelled “vamos José!” The other septuagenarians and octogenarians followed suit and practically littered the ground with petit fors and canape. Joe caught eyes with Stacey one more time energized by the reverence for him he could see on her face.

As he made his way on to the stage, he was met by the ancient retiring senator. He leaned on a cane that had what appeared to Joe to have a real ivory handle. The man’s tie not only traversed his substantial extended belly but lapped it by a good seven inches. The expenditure of energy standing for this amount of time was clearly taking its toll.

“I had almost given up on you boy,” Senator Roberts said with a gurgle following his Southern drawl. “Now listen here, if you’re gonna do this job you gotta be on time. You know what they say in the Army? They say if you’re not five minutes early, you’re five minutes late. Now, you remember that ya hear?”

Joe was exhausted with the absurdity of this man but knew better than to say anything other than “yes sir.”

To Joe’s extreme dismay, Senator Roberts continued with his lesson, “now did you take a piss? And if you got to shit, you better do that too. You can’t give no speech if you gotta make the whole time.”

Joe just nodded, and at this point he was mortally uncomfortable. Stacey waited on the periphery realizing that she desperately needed to usher the Senator onto the stage. The crowd had just started singing “This Little Light of Mine” which was his cue.

But he was not finished with his tutelage. In a not-so low voice after pulling Joe closer to him he said, “now, I know that little wife of yours is always in D.C. filming her show. Has she taken care of your man needs lately?”

Joe had no response other than feeling his pupils dilate.

“I don’t know if we’ve got enough time, but maybe we can get that cute little leggy red head with the big tits to take care of that,” and he began to look around aimlessly before returning to Joe. “You know back when I was first elected in the Seventies ladies had just started dressing slutty and there was this blonde right in the front with these big ol’ tits in this tight little sweater. You know I just can’t resist those big ol’ natural titties, not them store-bought ones. Well, it was November and it was cold and her nipples were pokin’ through that sweater. Hoo boy! I was harder than trigonometry! I’ll tell you that right now. I had to drag my speech out another twenty minutes to calm down before I could step away from the podium. I just...”

As the Senator was giving this delightful account of statesmanship, Joe had walked him to the very edge of the curtain of the stage and said, “I’ll keep that in mind next time. I’ll see you in a minute Senator,” and then practically pushed him on to the stage.

The crowd erupted in cheers as the announcer asked them to come to their feet to welcome the lion of the Senate, Senator Adlai Roberts. The old man was absolutely electrified by this monstrous crowd. He felt at least ten years younger. For a fleeting minute, he gave a thought to saying, ‘to hell with retirement, how ‘bout one more term?’ but he realized there

was more than one senator-sized lump in the grass of Ashley Hughes' backyard and thought better of it. He was, however, too excited to read off the teleprompter and decided to improvise.

"What a welcome North Carolina! This right here is a welcome. Ain't nobody know how to celebrate America better than the Agapeans, am I right?" Of course, the crowd enthusiastically agreed. The senator continued, "and you know why? Because this is the *real* America. This is the America everybody wants but no one wants to admit."

He beamed with pride as he looked out on the sea of homogenous white faces all wearing the antique symbol of Christian defiance of oppression. *This* was the America he always dreamed of. But as he drank in his delight, Stacey paced frantically backstage while the old bastard doubled his allotted time and threatened to ruin everything. But, he didn't give a damn about the schedule, he was on a roll now. After being struck with the visual of the sea of electric candlelight in front of him he said, "you all just sang 'this little light of mine'? Well, when you add all those little lights together, they shine brighter than the sun. And, I say LET THEM SHINE!"

The antique asshole just inadvertently stole the climatic line of Joe's speech that Ashley herself had prepared. Stacey was apoplectic. "Oh fuck. Oh fuck. Fuck! No! Oh, fuck what am I gonna do?" She dropped her clipboard and crouched to her knees with her hands clasped behind her head.

Joe crouched down in front of her and picked up the clipboard before saying in a soft voice, "Stacey, it's going to be okay. I've got this." He put a hand on her elbow, gently ushering her up to her feet again and said, "I promise."

Stacey summoned every ounce of her strength to not kiss him then and there as he handed the clipboard back to her. Just then old Senator Jim Crow was wrapping up.

"Now, I want y'all to all get up and welcome the next senator from the great state of North Carolina, Senator José Hughes!" Although he said Joe's name with a hard "J", the senator at least managed to avoid using any racial epithets so it was considered a grand success.

Joe entered the stage to thunderous applause. As he arrived the senator held his right arm aloft as if he had already won the election. After the photo-op was completed the senator's parting words to Joe were, "now if that don't make your cock hard boy, I'd say you ain't got one" and waddled off the stage.

As Joe took the podium, the time on the clocks was 8:54. He barely had time to get through an abbreviated version of his stump speech before the time approached for Ashley's show to start. At 8:59, Joe said, "our timing is fortunate folks because, as you all know, my better half is in Washington D.C. holding our so-called leaders and the liberal media in check. She has a special program tonight that I want you all to see. What do you say? Do you want to tune in with me?" As Joe completed his staged interrogatory the Vincere feed was projected on the giant screens to his right and left.

Stacey breathed an extreme sigh of relief. Somehow José had managed to improvise with half the time and throwing the cue a few seconds later actually worked better than she



planned because it allowed them to skip the five second intro and go straight to Ashley. She thought he was an absolute miracle worker.

As anticipated, Ashley's speech threw the crowd into a frenzy. After the standing ovation, Joe said, "isn't she amazing everyone. I am a lucky, lucky man. If you elect me your next Senator you will also be sending the best Senator's wife this country has ever known to Washington, D.C.!"

At that point, Joe's watch buzzed with the cue he had been waiting for. He continued, "now we have one last surprise for you all and it's coming this way now!"

At that moment the stadium's speakers started playing Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries*. Over the familiar opening of the piece the crowd heard the distinct thumping of a helicopter. As the music reached the crescendo the helicopter appeared over the Colosseum. Rising over over the frenetic applause and doing a sweep over the crowd it then landed right on the Narthex in view of the entire stadium.

The spotlight was trained on the door of the helicopter and out stepped Ashley in a dress of brilliant blue. To the congregants it was as if the angel of the lord had come down from heaven and alighted right before their eyes. They did not know whether they should bow or rend their clothes in ecstatic passion. If they could will America to submit to a ruler, she would have been crowned by acclamation on the spot. She waved to the crowd as Joe jogged down to meet her as planned in the middle of the Colosseum floor. As he went to embrace her, she grabbed his hands and brought them down before creating a barrier in between them.

"Can't get wrinkled babe," she said as she stood on her tip toes to give him a quick, tasteful kiss.

They waved to the crowd and Joe started to turn away from the stage. The plan had been for them to use this moment for their grand exit and after waving to the crowd they would both walk back to the helicopter and exit. However, Ashley had other ideas.

"I think we need to give them a little more babe," and with that, she took his hand and they walked back to the stage waving like royalty to the assembled masses. As they climbed the stairs to the stage, Joe thought he would give Ashley a quick introduction. After all this was *his* night and they were on the eve of him capturing the nomination. But that thought was nullified as Ashley marched straight to the podium.

"Good evening, Agape! How are y'all doing tonight?" Her voice oozed with a thick Southern drawl that had nearly disappeared from her television persona. "Well, I am blessed. I am blessed to be here with all of you. I am blessed to be out of Washington, D.C., I can tell you that much!" This remark was met with calamitous applause.

She continued, "it was a little bit of TV magic that made it look like I got here so fast," as if anyone was left in the world who actually thought television programs were live, "but I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I'll tell you the stink of that swamp is so bad, I had to change my outfit to get it off of me. What do you think?"

She stepped out from behind the podium and performed an elegant pirouette accented by her matching blue heels and her long blonde hair swished in synchrony with the flow of her bright blue gown. “You like it?” she beamed as she returned to the mic. At this point she removed the microphone from its stand and started the walk and talk down the stage. Joe was left standing there not sure if he should follow her like a lapdog or fall into the shadows.

“But more than anything I am blessed to be wife of the next senator from the great State of North Carolina, Mr. José A. Hughes!” She turned to gesture in his direction and Joe believed that was his invitation to take the mic to continue his speech. He was mistaken.

Ashley turned back around to face the crowd and launched into a new diatribe. Joe awkwardly waved and started backpedaling to the podium as she moved forward and around the stage. Her speech was a ten-minute-long bombastic discourse picking up on several themes announced on her show. Joe realized that no part of this was extemporaneous and Ashley had no intention of returning the spotlight to him.

As he watched Ashley whip the crowd into a fury, Joe did not feel enmity toward her. In this moment he only felt gratitude that he did not have to be the architect of his rise to power. After all, he would be the one casting votes in Congress. He would be the one with the real power. But that was not important right now. Right now, they had a mission. They had a mission to save the country from the wayward souls who turned it from the righteous path. History would remember him, not Ashley, as a savior of multitudes.

Ashley was coming to the climax again, “so Agapeans are you ready to take a stand with me? Are you ready to defend your country? Are you ready to *fight* for our lord and savior, Jesus Christ? And are you ready to send Joe and me to the United States Senate? Then get on your feet and fight for Agape. Get out there and make it happen! We love you! May the love of Jesus bless you! And may God bless the Christian United States of America!”

With that Lee Greenwood’s eponymous song *Proud To Be An American* began playing and Joe took the cue to join Ashley at the front of the stage. As he arrived beside her, she put her arm around his back and yelled in his ear over the din, “button your jacket!”

Joe inhaled his colon into his chest cavity and managed to slide the button into place before exhaling and praying that the stitching would hold. While he was executing this maneuver, Ashley extricated herself and was waving with both hands. When his mission was complete, he returned his arm around her to wave. He felt a quick look of disgust train itself on his abdomen for a fleeting second before returning to smiling and waving.

At this cue, fireworks leapt up behind them and the helicopters’ rotors sprang to life again. Ashley took his hand and the two started walking down the grand aisle to the make the walk through the Colosseum to the aircraft. Although Ashley was in heels, she navigated the steps down the stage more adroitly than Joe and they continued down the grand carpeted aisle. As they walked, staff and media followed a respectful distance behind them.

When they were approximately halfway down the aisle through the floor seating area, Ashley saw a man step from his seat to her left and he pulled out what appeared to be a small pistol. Ashley barely had time to process the image in her mind before a blur from her

periphery vision sprang forward. It was a tall, slender woman with long dark hair pulled back tastefully. In a flash she snatched the pistol out of the would-be assassin's hands and instantly smashed him directly in the nose with it. Ashley saw the blood pour forth before he had time to realize what was happening. The woman then flipped the pistol in the palm of her hand and struck the man with the grip directly behind his ear above his jawline instantly rendering him unconscious as he collapsed to the floor.

When Joe finally realized what was happening, he hurled himself in front of Ashley grabbing her, throwing her to the floor, and landing on top of her to shield her body. He closed his eyes and clinched his teeth but the shot he was expecting never came. He then looked over his shoulder and saw the mystery woman produce a pair of zip ties from her suit jacket and bind the unconscious man's hands behind his back. The confused crowd sat in a stunned silence.

She then barked a command at Stacey who stood trembling behind the Hugheses. "Hey. Hey! You!" she yelled sharply with an accent Stacey could not place. She then snapped her fingers and Stacey's fugue was broken. "Tell the announcer to say that the disturbance is over and to please keep their seats. Use those exact words. Do it!"

After that sharp command Stacey reflexively obeyed and the announcement was made a second later. By now the State Troopers had arrived and were pulling the dazed man who was slowly regaining consciousness to his feet and dragging him away.

The woman then took the semi-automatic pistol in her hands and pulled back the slide to check the chamber. Instead of ejecting a round, one snapped into place. She scoffed at the incompetence of American assassins. This imbecile was too worried about his camera time to actually load a round. She slipped the pistol into her waist band and turned to the Hugheses to get them up to begin damage control.

First, she barked another order to Stacey, "get us a mic right now." Again, Stacey relayed the command in her earpiece without thinking and in a matter of seconds a production assistant was running up the aisle.

The woman then approached Ashley who had just been helped to her feet. At this point, she was angrier at Joe for overreacting and standing there panicking like a goon with his jacket burst open and his mouth agape. Her new protector then said, "Mrs. Hughes, the threat is contained. Now, we must stop a crowd panic. Make a quick statement saying that you are okay. Thank God and the crowd and continue with your exit as planned. But..." and she paused half a breath for emphasis, "be quick." With that Ashley was handed the mic and knew exactly what to do.

"Well folks as the good book says, 'if God is for us, who can be against us?' We're okay!" The crowd thundered in applause. "No one can stand against the people of God!"

At this point, Joe leaned into the microphone, "thank you Agape! Thank you, North Carolina! God bless you all. Good night!"

He then handed the mic to Stacey and they continued on to the waiting helicopter. Before they started up the last stairs, Ashley stopped to find her new friend and embraced her like a lost child reunited with a parent.

“Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! My god... who are you?” she said, her voice cracking with emotion.

“Maryam Vráchos. I am here to interview to be your director of security, Mrs. Hughes,” she replied.

“Maryam! From Mossad, you’re the one that...”

With the mention of the word “Mossad,” Maryam gently raised a finger to her lips. “We’ll talk more later, but now for your safety, it is best that you continue your exit swiftly, Mrs. Hughes.”

Ashley responded, “yes, yes, you’re right. But can I see you right away? Can you come to our room at the Lodge in about an hour?”

“Of course. One hour. I will see you then. Let’s go now,” and ushered the Hugheses to move up the stairs.

When they began their ascent, Maryam immediately got to work. Everyone gathered around her waiting for instructions, which she began without hesitation. Again, she turned to Stacey, “we have got to calm these people down so they will make an orderly exit. Tell the crew, NO MARCHES. Play something soft. Mozart, Beethoven, chorale music, play a lullaby for all I care, but keep it soft. And send me the leader of that militia outside.” She then turned to the State Trooper, “fan your men out and make sure there are no stragglers. *Gently* usher people toward the exits. Calm down anyone getting boisterous.”

Then, as commanded, a bearded man in combat fatigues carrying a semi-automatic rifle snapped to attention before her. “Are you the militia commander?” she asked.

“Yes ma’am,” the man beamed thrilled to be referred to as a “commander.”

“Good. Tell your men to fan out among the crowd to keep an eye out for odd behavior. If anyone is here alone and does not make eye contact, dispatch a man to follow him to his car. *Do not engage*. Take photos of his face and license plate and report back to me directly.”

“Yes ma’am,” he shouted like a Marine recruit at the top of his lungs and began to scurry off. She caught him by the sleeve and pulled him back.

“Hey, listen to me. Look me in the eyes,” she said as the man stood there in awe redirecting his best forward looking soldier stare to meet her eyes. “Your men are untrained and undisciplined. Do. Not. Engage. Are we clear?”

The man gave one final “yes ma’am” and started off. One of his compatriots met him on the steps as he relayed the command. Before they were out of earshot Maryam heard him say, “she’s from Mossad dude. Do what she fucking says.”

As Joe and Ashley reached the top of the stairs they turned and waved to the crowd one more time before getting in the helicopter and taking off. As they lifted off from the Narthex, the pilot did another swoop around the ring of the Colosseum for one last victory lap.

Ashley turned to Joe and said, “that was fucking AMAZING!!!” and enthusiastically slapped his thigh as she stomped both feet and cheered. Joe smiled to see her so delighted with the outcome, but he could not contain his disappointment from souring the expression on his face. It was abundantly clear that he, the actual candidate, was never in any danger. The assassin was targeting Ashley.

Ashley was too consumed with ecstasy to notice.