

Chapter I

Summer, Year 2178

Washington, DC

This heat is oppressive, he thought, but it's the humidity, always the humidity, that really does me in. He hated the feel of bead after bead of water, rendered from his dark skin, as it slid over the taut flesh that stretched across his rib cage, until each individual drop joined those that had preceded it at the waistband of his stylishly tailored trousers. Saturating his shirt, the moisture finally found its way through the layers of cloth. The accumulating moisture caused the soft flesh of his anal verge to feel as though a foamy lather had been deposited there. His every movement heightened the discomfort. He sensed the foul mood that threatened to claim him.

Refocusing on the crowd, he ordered himself to disregard his personal discomfort. Laughing, impervious to the heat, their passion driving all concern from their minds. How wonderful, he thought. All the while, his words, hands and heart brought the emotions of the two million people stretched out before the stage to a fevered pitch that made him proud. He loved the feeling of power such

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moments brought him. Abandoning the script, he spoke from his heart.

"My fellow Americans, if we stand united, if we carry this spirit of sacrifice, this message of solidarity, back to the cities, towns and villages from which we have all traveled, if we will vote as one, nothing can stop you from electing me as the next President of these United States."

The voices of the millions who were witness to this historic moment rose up, drowning out his next words before they could be heard. He jabbed the air with his upraised fist. The crowd surged against the stage, set hard against the 14th street curb. The Washington Monument loomed above them in the background, and out ahead of him, stretching the full length of the National Mall, was a virtual sea of expectant faces. The strength of their numbers sent a shudder through the metal superstructure of the stage and the hearts of the Republicrats. He looked quickly back at the fifteen people sitting on the dais behind him. Their faces were jubilant, and their voices mingled with those before him in affirmation of their candidate for president.

He held his hands high, urging his supporters to be calm so that he might continue. Slowly the noise abated, and he began to speak.

"Just now, I looked back at the fine people behind me on this stage and farther back to the Washington Monument standing tall above us. These are the leaders of our party," he turned and gestured toward them, "and three of them were there seventy years ago with me, when with a handful of others, we founded the Americans of Mexican and Latin Traditions Party in a small office building in Los Angeles, California. The two hundred and fifty years of political history before the founding of our party had not been kind to us. We had squandered our votes and our

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power in a thousand little self interest groups spread across this land. Each one doing good, some more concerned with themselves than with our destiny, but no group had ever achieved the power, the clout necessary to make an impact. When we joined together that night in Los Angeles, we changed the history of the United States, and now we are only two years removed from that day when the history books will be rewritten once again, because an AOMLATT will reside in the White House, and I'll sleep in Abraham Lincoln's bed."

The earth shook. The heavens seemed to open up in a torrent of shrieks and wails, as banners were waved, and the assembled masses celebrated their coming victory. The stage began to vibrate, but everyone held on gamely as he calmed the crowd and continued.

"It was not too many days after the first announcement of our new national party that some glib editorial writer looked at our new name and came up with the acronym of AOMLATT for us and it has stuck. We have been AOMLATTs ever since, and I am proud to be an AOMLATT."

The crowd tried to rally, but he quieted them quickly, wanting to get to the heart of his message.

"An omelet is a perfect metaphor for us. All the ingredients and spices swirl together and out comes this healthy, beautiful creation. That is us. Look around you, look at the skin, the eyes, the mouths of your brothers and sisters. Listen to them speak. We, thank God, are all different, because we trace our ancestors back to twenty-seven different countries on three continents. From Spain to Cuba, from Mexico to Brazil, no matter how many generations removed, no matter that in this great melting pot of America we have mixed our blood with that of others, because through all of us runs an unalterable thread. A gene so pure that

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nothing can diminish its potency: it is our hot Latin blood and our fierce pride.

"I am Steven Hidalgo and I will be the next President of the United States."

As though on cue, all who were seated behind him jumped to their feet, applauding his grand vision as the crowd thundered its approval. He raised his arms in celebration, and as his right forearm flashed past his eyes, he quickly glanced at the physical experience monitor on his wrist. He made a mental note that he had just half a Lex left to conclude his speech. The monitor was held firmly in place by a matching gold sensing band that circumscribed his wrist. Commonly referred to by the masses as a Phem monitor, this alternative method of measuring one's evolution upon the earth had long ago replaced the archaic time tracker known to bygone generations as a wrist watch. For the vast majority of people who walked this earth, time did not exist. Oh, for certain, the official atomic clock of the United States, housed in Boulder, Colorado, still beat out time, second by split second, but time had become irrelevant in every day living. The old style method of record keeping, now called nuclear time, was only used in government or corporate operations where precise accuracy was required. During a normal day, vast sections of the population lived outside of time in a physiological wonderland devoid of the daily pressures that previous generations had allowed to be built upon them, tick by staggering tick. Those who wore a Phem monitor lived their lives to the beat of their own hearts, a concept known as the Phexmatic system. The single hand that moved past the twenty-four positions on the face of Senator Hidalgo's Phem monitor was powered forward by every beat of his heart, and all those, including the senator, that lifted their arms in salute to their hero lived their lives in complete

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harmony with their bodies. Society had restructured itself around the fact that every individual's heart beat at a slightly different rate. Precise arrival and appointment times had been eliminated in all work environments; workers still accomplished all required tasks, and productivity rates had increased. Overhead and unnoticed by all who celebrated Senator Hidalgo's future victory, and in direct violation of established over-flight and security procedures, a small but nimble helicopter swooped into position a mile off at four thousand feet, allowing it a complete view of the mall and the stage at the far end. The jet copter was there no more than thirty seconds and as Senator Hidalgo raised his arms high into the warm afternoon air, further engaging the passions of his supporters, an instantaneous spear of blue light flashed through the sky. To the collective amazement of all who mistakenly thought they were witnessing a planned light show, they instead, in utter horror, saw the light pass through the body of their leader, vaporizing the cloth and flesh of the man they loved — the man who would fulfill their destiny. A perfect four inch hole appeared where Steven Hidalgo's heart had been. There was no blood loss, as the tremendous heat had cauterized even the largest arteries. He stood there for brief seconds, a puzzled look animating his face. He glanced backward to the stunned figures standing motionless behind him. His eyes sought out the warm, but now terrified, brown eyes of a middle- aged woman. He held her at rapt attention. She saw his expression of disbelief, then resignation, and finally, just before he collapsed onto the stage floor, she saw and understood his fervent appeal to carry on. The laser had passed through him, striking a loudspeaker at the back of the stage, and sparks shot into the air as the speaker

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erupted in flame. The stunned silence was followed by mayhem. The crowd bolted in every direction while all but one of the party's directors dove for cover onto the thin carpet covering the metal floor of the stage. Kathy Sandoval remained standing in utter disbelief. Then, with an audible sigh of deep anguish, she sat down heavily on the metal chair behind her. Staring blankly at the floor, while all around her chaos reigned, she slowly absorbed the blow that had literally sucked the air from her lungs. Every few seconds she glanced over at the inert form of the greatest man Kathy had ever known, each time hoping he would be standing before her, proud, strong and self-reliant. Kathy was cursing silently under her breath. She buried her face in the palms of her hands as reality replaced shock. Suddenly, she knew he would not rise up, and she stopped looking toward him. The others were gathered around him now, searching for signs of life, but she knew her friend, her mentor and the greatest Mexican American politician in the history of the United States was gone. Kathy began to cry. Her body trembled with emotion and her tears, seeping between her fingers, left a darkening stain in the faded green carpet.

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