

The President

John Stewart



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Prologue

The President was missing. Every corner of the White House had been checked and double-checked, but without success. The Vice-President was in Europe. He had not been called, for everyone expected the President suddenly to appear and of course an unnecessary fuss was the last thing that they wanted. The whole situation was most odd, for the President rarely had a moment to himself. Indeed, it seemed that every second of his day was monitored. Yet, after breakfast, he had simply disappeared.

The White House Chief of Staff was in a quandary but just when he had at last decided to go public, the phone rang. The President had been found sitting on a park bench near the Lincoln Memorial.

Chapter One

The limo drew to a sudden stop and the lean grey-haired figure of the White House Chief of Staff jumped out and hurried to where the President was sitting.

‘Mr President, are you OK?’ he called out anxiously.

‘Never better, Joss. Sit down for a moment.’

Joss Johnson obeyed reluctantly.

‘I’ve been watching the people visiting the Memorial. The young ones skip up and come down slowly, and the old crawl up and step out coming down.’

‘Well, there’s one oldie descending pretty slowly.’

‘Another theory in the garbage can!’

‘*Are you all right, Sir?* We’ve been looking for you all morning! In fact, we’re all in orbit at the cottage! What happened?’

‘It’s OK, Joss, I’m not crazy! It was, shall we say, an unusual morning. I had to escape. I’ll explain later, but meantime, duty calls. We’d better go back. Sorry to have raised your blood pressure!’

‘But, Sir, nobody saw you leave. How did you get out undetected?’

‘Joss, I walked out but no one seemed to see me. As I said, it was an unusual morning, but more later.’

John Duncan sprang lightly to his feet. He looked younger than his forty-nine years, though his hair was turning grey.

‘The Joint Chiefs have been waiting for some time,’ Johnson prompted.

‘They’re not waiting, Joss. They’re talking!’

‘You’re OK, Sir!’

Both men laughed. Yet Johnson still had disturbing reservations. The US President had acted strangely and that was something he dared not ignore. He needed to know more. What exactly happened this morning? It was an urgent question not to be delayed.



By chance the BBC correspondent Sarah Crawford had witnessed the arrival of Joss Johnson and had seen his agitated conversation with the man on the bench who, to her amazement, turned out to be John Duncan. What was going on? There was something very odd about it all, for the tenant of the White House was always surrounded by a posse of thick-necked bodyguards; to be on his own was something very strange indeed. This was a scoop, to say the least, but she felt constrained. Firstly she was BBC and one of the old school and, secondly, she had dined with Joss Johnson and his wife on two occasions. 'Thus conscience doth make cowards of us all,' she muttered to herself. She had better speak to Joss. It was the decent thing.



After receiving Sarah Crawford's phone call, Johnson knew he had to act. Luckily he caught the President between meetings and was able to put his case immediately.

Duncan's response was instant and strangely casual. The expected concern about possible political damage was wholly absent.

'Invite her here to supper, tonight if she can make it, and maybe you and Joan could join us. Joss, this isn't an executive order. It doesn't have to be tonight.'

'We're OK, I think, and I know Sarah has been angling for a one-to-one for some time. So I think we've got a date.'

'Let's hope so, for these media people are usually pretty busy,' the President responded and again there was the same casual unconcerned air. This wasn't the usual Duncan.

Joss, though, was sure that Sarah Crawford wouldn't miss the opportunity. 'I'll tell her about your wine cellar!'

'Now I know the reason that you're the Chief of Staff!'

A gentle knock heralded the President's next appointment and Joss took his leave. As he walked to his office, Johnson was pensive. His boss was still quick and efficient but Joss had the strong impression that he didn't seem to care. It was as if nothing mattered. Yet Joss couldn't fault him, for he had dealt with the Crawford matter without the slightest hesitation. Tonight, perhaps, all would be revealed.



Thank God she did the decent thing, Sarah reflected. For so easily the journalistic instinct for a story could have won. Then, how

could she have looked Joss Johnson in the eye, or Duncan for that matter? Now she was having supper with the President and his Chief of Staff. Decency had paid her dividend.

What was she going to wear? She smiled at the rise of the familiar mantra for she knew exactly what dress would be appropriate. Then she laughed when she thought of all the innuendo and the clever sniping at her too-nice image. Her colleagues at the Beeb would have to think again, for dinner with the President was real 'hard copy'.



Sarah Crawford was not the only one who was observing at the Lincoln Memorial. Just before setting out for his White House dinner appointment, Joss received a call from a trusted press insider. A tabloid was running a story in their early edition, headed 'Duncan goes AWOL.' Johnson was livid and phoned the editor but, of course, it made no difference. The story was the thing and the people had the right to be informed.

'Hogwash!' Johnson grated as he slammed the phone down.

