



FINAL CHANCE



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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1 – WINTER WONDERLAND, 2066

CHAPTER 2 – FORTY-SIX YEARS AGO, 2020

CHAPTER 3 – UNFORGETTABLE FORTIES

CHAPTER 4 – HICCUPS

CHAPTER 5 – CHANGING OF THE GUARDS

CHAPTER 6 – THE BIG TIME

CHAPTER 7 – DOME DETAIL

CHAPTER 8 – HAPPY NEW YEAR!

CHAPTER 9 – THE INAUGURATION – 2053

CHAPTER 10 – DATES & STATES

CHAPTER 11 – FAST TRACK

CHAPTER 12 – WEDDING DERAILING?

CHAPTER 13 – VOWS

CHAPTER 14 – AN INTERESTING FAVOR

CHAPTER 15 – VALUED EMPLOYEES

CHAPTER 16 – FAILURES

CHAPTER 17 – RIGHTING WRONGS

CHAPTER 18 – THE 2050'S

CHAPTER 19 – “MEET THE FAMILY”

CHAPTER 20 – A BIG DECISION

CHAPTER 21 – THE 2060 ELECTION

CHAPTER 22 – THE STATE OF THE STATES-2061

CHAPTER 23 – MOVING DAY WRINKLES
CHAPTER 24 – SITUATIONS
CHAPTER 25 – BOTOX, ANYONE?
CHAPTER 26 – THE YEAR OF THE STORAGE BATTERY
CHAPTER 27 – BLAST FROM THE PAST?
CHAPTER 28 – ALPHABET SOUP
CHAPTER 29 – OPEN SEASON ON SENATORS
CHAPTER 30 – A CHILLING MESSAGE
CHAPTER 31 – RIGHT TO BEAR
CHAPTER 32 – A GOOD MOVE
CHAPTER 33 – CURRYING FAVOR
CHAPTER 34 – ARCTIC BAD. INDIA WORSE.
CHAPTER 35 – THE DAY AFTER
CHAPTER 36 – HAPPY NEW YEAR! (2066)
CHAPTER 37 – SLEEPING WITH THE SECRETARY
CHAPTER 38 – PICKING UP THE BATON
CHAPTER 39 – ENDINGS & NEW BEGINNINGS
EPILOGUE
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS
ABOUT THE AUTHOR
FINAL CHANCE QUESTIONS FOR BOOK CLUBS

Chapter 1 - Winter Wonderland, 2066

Camp David, Frederick County, Maryland. Friday, January 15th, 2066. The presidential chopper, “Marine One,” flew over the bleak landscape, a snow-covered wasteland punctuated by domes protecting towns, cities, agricultural hubs, and an occasional forested area. There were also numerous cemeteries, a stark legacy of the many pandemics that claimed so many lives.

As the chopper approached Camp David, the two youngest first family members were squealing with delight. At eight and nine years old, the girls had been coming to the Retreat for most of their lives – five years – and they knew that the staff at Camp David would have let in the snow.

All four members of the family were looking forward to their weekend at the presidential retreat in the wooded hills of Catoctin Mountain Park. The entire two-hundred-acre retreat had been protected from the inhospitable environment under two interconnecting glass domes. The Aspen Lodge (the main residential building), Laurel Lodge (used for meetings and conferences), the swimming pool, and the one-hole practice golf course were under the main dome. The other, smaller dome covered an adjacent area of forest. The domes were connected via a secure tubed corridor, also of glass. Outside the domes, the unprotected areas were covered with a heavy white blanket of snow, artistically hiding the dead or dying trees and bushes.

The forested dome contained cleverly engineered panels that could be opened to capture a great deal of falling snow. The panels were then closed, and the temperature brought down to what would once

have been normal outdoor temperature, so the snow kept its fresh powdery texture and appeal, waiting for the young family members to enjoy a good old-fashioned snow day.

After a quick change into snow gear, the president and family, along with their ever-present Secret Service detail, who were also dressed for the activity, headed to the forest dome.

Almost two hours later, all of them – including some of the Secret Service agents who had joined in the snowball battles – trudged back to the main dome and the Aspen Lodge. The president had decided to unwind with laps in the enclosed pool. The enclosure had been retained, even after the dome was erected so that it could be kept warmer than the coolish temperature preferred for other outdoor activities.

Enjoying the warmth of the water along with the calming quiet of solitude and swimming, President Bo Sanders was more relaxed than he'd been in days. That couldn't help him forget the Russian situation, however. His gut opinion, and that of his military advisors, was that the Russians were bluffing, as they'd been doing for years. But it was unheard of and unnerving that there had been no communication between the two countries' governments in over ten days.

Still, there were two positives for him to draw solace from. First, the perpetrators and architects of assassinations and thousands of American deaths were behind bars and would cause no further problems. And second, the leadership of the United States was undisputed in spearheading the effort to save the planet.

It was almost twenty years ago that the doming plan was conceived and announced. It was audacious and dismissed by many, at home and abroad, as an impossible headline grab. But the United States could never be counted out, as Joe Biden, the forty-sixth president, had reminded everyone when he took office amidst the first coronavirus pandemic in 2021. During World War II, he noted, a single car-manufacturing plant had been retooled to make a new

four-engine B-24 bomber every hour. And on the west coast, a group of shipyards built a new ship every day for four years.

It was with that memory, that vision in their rear-view mirror – along with the reality that there was no alternative to avoid the complete devastation of humanity – that drove three U.S. presidents to do the impossible. It was their final chance.

Sanders reflected on the successful plan, rapidly constructing thousands of domes worldwide, from Washington to Los Angeles to Beijing to ... The thought was never finished, as a “Switchblade” UAV – unmanned aerial vehicle, or drone – smashed through the dome and enclosure at over a hundred miles an hour, exploding just yards away from the president. The explosion killed POTUS and the Secret Service detail instantly, even before it released its toxic gas. The gas then killed another three agents rushing to the scene before a lucky one radioed to others in the Lodge to take the family to the bunker.

Chapter 2 - Forty-Six Years Earlier, 2020

The “Turbulent Twenties” and “Threatening Thirties,” or simply “The Lost Decades,” were all appropriate monikers as the devastating combination of polarizing politics and deadly pandemics took tens of millions of lives and crippled global economies, obscuring the frightening evidence that climate change was not only real but was evolving at a rate faster than scientists had predicted.

People around the world watched helplessly as their lives crumbled as a result of the clever viruses and less-clever miscues and mismanagement by governments. As the people pushed back, their governments turned to greater and greater authoritarian tactics.

Meanwhile, in the background, the effects of climate change became much more than theories and headlines about record temperatures. Wildfires throughout the United States, Canada, South America, Europe, Australia, and parts of Asia surpassed man as the biggest danger to forests; and severe flooding impacted areas thought to be safe. Venice became almost uninhabitable except for the few who chose to hang on, using boats from their second-floor dwellings.

Closer to home, dozens of cities along the East Coast, West Coast, and the Gulf of Mexico were being flooded almost daily, including New York, Philadelphia, District of Columbia, Miami, and New Orleans.

Severe flooding brought about even greater devastation with major dam failures. Two of them, in California and Michigan, killed almost fifteen thousand people and destroyed over one hundred thousand

homes. And while those two were the news grabbers, there had been at least five dam failures every year. With over fifteen thousand dams in the U.S. – many of them built before 1900 – it wasn't surprising.

The jet streams were shifting, causing rain, snow, and freezing conditions in areas not accustomed to cold weather. In other areas, especially those near the equator, the summer temperatures were so hot as to make them uninhabitable. Both temperature extremes placed even more pressure on the environment through increased heating and air conditioning needs.

And then there were the health issues. First was the series of pandemics that offered scant respite between the one-to two-year plagues. And if that wasn't enough, there were the climate-related health conditions that had risen to unprecedented and worrying levels. More and more people were suffering from eye ailments, ranging from irritated red eyes to photokeratitis, pinguecula, pterygium, and macular degeneration.

Skin cancers of all types – basal cell carcinoma, squamous cell carcinoma, and melanoma – were also increasing, and not just among sun worshippers.

Asthma and other respiratory ailments were rising right along with the air pollution levels.

Farmers throughout the world were reporting smaller yields and failed crops, forestry services shared major instances of drought and disease, and fishermen were coming back to ports with far smaller catches than normal.

With economies crumbling, tax revenues dried up just when they were most needed. These natural disasters occurred within the space of decades rather than centuries, so with not enough money, countries just continued to add debt, putting off the inevitable day of reckoning, and nose-diving their already fragile economies into the ground.

Unfortunately, the United States epitomized what was happening around the world. The extreme political polarization of the electorate had effectively stopped any consensus and progress, regardless of which party was in power, prompting yet another upheaval in each electoral cycle. That should have been bad enough, but each upheaval was preceded and accompanied by mass violence. Running for office also meant pinning a target on your back, and the number of candidates who were gunned down had passed the hundred mark.

The Beli-Tel Company. Despite the plethora of problems, the twenties were not without their share of innovations. Back in the early 2020s, Vijay Patel, a brilliant scientist who'd immigrated from a slum in Mumbai, India, to attend MIT, invented the VT2. It was a very hi-tech health and fitness watch that could accurately predict the wearer's date of death as well as tell time. A medical doctor as well as a Ph.D. in mathematics, Vijay had hoped that the watch's capability would help people get their affairs in order and say their good-byes, but many wearers used it as a prompt to take revenge, often with the help of an easily acquired gun.

Vijay and his business partner, Alek Belikov, a Russian émigré, had tweaked the VT2's capabilities to include psychological markers to help the FBI fight election interference.

Alek possessed a wide-open imagination and, some might add, sense of humor. In fact, it was one aspect of Alek's vision – or was it his sense of humor? – that saved his life and helped bring down the Russian agents interfering in U.S. elections. Alek had prophesied, long before it became a reality, that most peripherals – such as health monitors and smartphones – would become obsolete and that communication and data transmission would be handled by wearables or even implants. He was convinced that microchips, implanted close to the brain, could allow conversations and data

exchange without devices. He did confess that the idea came from a 1967 movie starring James Coburn. Still, he had been inspired enough to design a microchip that he had embedded in his head by a veterinarian friend. And it was that very chip that allowed the FBI to locate him, along with his captors, when he was kidnapped.

Vijay and Alek worked together to help make VitalTech the undisputed leader amongst health/sport watches. Following issues with the “Final Notice” death warning, the watch was modified and improved, offering a variety of health-analyzing features, including functions that monitored cardiac issues, diabetic conditions, cancer markers, and even early-stage behavioral abnormalities. These new features were the bedrock of the upgraded model, the VT3.

The biggest boost for the company, however, as a result of a breakthrough project of Alek and Vijay’s – was the ability to detect early asymptomatic infection by the series of Coronaviruses, using an even newer upgrade, the VT4. The detection accuracy, although imperfect, was almost as good as any of the much more expensive and lengthy tests available. Sales of the new VT4 to a traumatized populace more than tripled. Vijay and Alek had been on the shortlist for a Nobel prize when a couple of very effective vaccines were released, over-shadowing their achievement.

Alek and Vijay’s partnership grew into a close friendship and when Alek married Sophie, the newlyweds became close friends with Vijay and his wife Jennifer. As a result of their frequent get-togethers, their children would also become good friends; but what they didn’t know was that events in the future would bond them even closer.

During the 2020s and 2030s, Vijay and Alek continued to adjust the VT4’s Coronavirus detection capability as COVID-19 morphed into COVID-21, COVID-25, COVID-30, and COVID-34. The good news was that with each version of the virus, the world got better at coping with it and developing effective vaccines more quickly.

Possibly because of countermeasures by humanity, the iterations of COVID stopped, or at least paused, in 2036. Most people might have sat back and breathed a big sigh of relief, but Alek and Vijay were different. For them, it provided the time and bandwidth to work on a project that would bring together Alek's implanted communication chip with the technology from Vijay's VT watch series. They were making progress and formed the Beli-Tel Corporation.

The communication capability of the new chip didn't work exactly as Alek had envisioned it ... yet. It needed an external device to make a call, and for most people, to hear it. Alek's vision was that a user with an embedded chip could simply think, "Call Home," or "Call John Smith," and the call would go through. The caller's voice would be picked up by their cell phone, but the inbound audio would stream directly to the user's brain via a "splice," to use a non-medical phrase, which connected the embedded head chip with the auditory nerve, bypassing the inner ear or cochlea.

For most people, this might seem like a strange and even risky workaround, instead of simply using a Bluetooth ear pod, but the quality of sound was far better, making issues like wind noise a thing of the past.

What made Alek's "far-out" idea a huge success, however, was the demand from the fifteen percent of the adult population who were hearing impaired. It even challenged the necessity of hearing aids, as a speaker app in the phone could stream audio from any source directly to "Gaya" – Beli-Tel's version of Siri or Alexa – which was then heard in the brain. This market alone launched Beli-Tel to the top of the trending tech companies.

Embedded chips had been in use for decades in the U.S. as security enhancements for workers in some industries, such as financial services and technology, and they were already commonplace in European and Scandinavian countries instead of credit cards. The Beli-Tel chips were different, however, in that they were designed to interact directly with their host's physiological system.

Alek doggedly pursued his dream of a user simply thinking, “Call the office,” and then carrying on a conversation; but the reality – at least for the moment – was that an external device was required. And that’s when his daughter, Nadya Belikov, suggested that the external device could be a VT5, rather than a phone. Nadya was seventeen.

Chapter 3 - Unforgettable Forties

Reap what you sow. The seeds of the 2040 election cycle had been planted twenty years before. Capping off two of the darkest decades of the country's history, the current Administration, House and Senate were in a virtual tie with the earlier 2016-2020 government to win the "Worst Government Ever" honors.

It had been increasingly apparent that the Administration would be yet another one-term phenomenon, and the vote confirmed it by a huge differential. Despite the glaring numerical difference, once again, the president and vice president, however, refused to give up their positions, citing voter fraud. Although impossible to justify, facts hadn't deterred them before.

With blind devotion from Congress along with what was becoming a new American tradition – the militias – they outshouted the saner elements while the occupants of the White House and One Naval Observatory squatted.

Surprisingly, the militias acted in an immediate and coordinated way, attacking black churches, mosques, and synagogues. Liberal governors, congress members, and senators were also targeted. As the death toll climbed into the hundreds, the United States military moved in and quite a few militias were foolish enough to fight back.

The outgoing president, who was extracted from the White House by Navy Seals, the vice president, Senate majority leader, eleven senators, and the chairman of their party were tried, and many were convicted of treason. It was discovered that several senators had functioned as field commanders for the militias, organizing and

directing their efforts. They, in turn, had been coordinated by officials of their Party in a planned coup. They were all incarcerated at Guantanamo long enough to decide what to do with them.

In the meantime, the new Administration uncovered many serious crimes by members of the outgoing Administration, the Cabinet, and congressional leaders. Everyone expected to find irregularities, but nobody anticipated how bad it was until the post-coup audits. It was only then that people began to understand why such desperate acts were taken to stay in office.

The world watched with various emotions ranging from abject horror to uncontrollable hilarity as the debates raged about what to do with the traitors. There was no shortage of ideas that ranged from deporting them – a non-starter, as no country would take them – to execution. It took adding a few more justices to the Supreme Court to uphold the final sentence for the worst offenders – execution via a firing squad.

The argument that tipped the scales was the painful reminder that no action was taken against the unlawful acts by the Administration and Congress in 2020 when the election results were not honored, and a violent coup took place.

The outgoing president, vice president, and six other congressional leaders were executed at Guantanamo. Despite the media blackout, there were leaks and some grainy videos of the ex-president, ex-vice-president, and at least two former congressional leaders who turned out to be not quite as brave as their rhetoric.

The election results along with the vacancies created by several arrests, created a large majority and total domination of the White House, Senate, and House, by the incoming and quite liberal Democratic party, all 203 factions.

While most of the country rejoiced in having a government that (mostly) told the truth and believed that even the bottom ninety-eight percent should be treated decently, if not equally, many right-wing

governors and politicians (who hadn't been imprisoned) were less than happy with having no clout in Washington.

Cleaning Up. Although the Democrats were accustomed to cleaning up after previous opposition administrations, this clean-up job involved toxic waste on a level never seen before. In addition, the economy was, to use an “Olde Irish or Scottish” expression, “shite.”

The new President, Angela Parkson, knew her priorities, and her 2040 Administration would be focused on the one issue that would keep everyone alive – fighting climate change. The choice was stark. To survive or not? The options were extremely limited. The gradual shift away from fossil fuels had slowed down the atmosphere's deterioration, but not fast enough.

Sadly, despite Parkson's sincerity and plan to focus on the environment, simply untangling the mismanagement and misappropriations of the trillions of dollars earmarked for relief efforts took years. Budgets had been plundered to fund unauthorized projects, leaving authorized projects underfunded.

There were also treaties that needed to be re-joined; many – mostly political – fences that required mending; and some walls that needed tearing down. The military's budgets had been plundered for pet projects and education funding was in shambles.

It took most of her first four years to simply get the U.S. back on track. A new tax code was bringing money in and the economy was thriving, both from stability as well as from the green shoots of a new program that was being hatched.

So, when Parkson won a second term, she promised that “this one would be different.”

The State of the Union address, 2046. Exactly one year into President Parkson's second term, the 2046 SOTU was the highly visible evidence of the greatest coming together the world had ever seen. In addition to the thousand people in the House Chamber, including political and scientific leaders from almost every country in the world, more than one hundred million watched in the U.S., and across the world – in over fifty languages – almost one billion people watched or listened.

The list of attendees and the single subject of the president's address were no secret. This was simply the culmination of years of planning and a marker of sorts for a "Second Age of Reason."

2046 was a year that Vijay Patel's twenty-six-year-old daughter, Karima, would remember for many reasons, but the SOTU address would burn brightly and forever. She, Jennifer, Vijay, and her younger brother, Jason, watched it on TV. They were a strikingly handsome family, especially for a bunch of brainiacs: Vijay with his tall, dark athletic build; Jennifer with her fair, blonde "all-American" looks; Jason, a young carbon-copy of his father; and Karima, a blend of both parents – tall and slim, with long jet-black hair, neatly tied back, and a honey-hued complexion framing a pair of startling grey eyes. That night, those intelligent, grey eyes were fixated on the screen.

President Parkson was a gifted orator who was often compared with Barack Obama. After she was introduced, it took a while for the audience to quiet down, and Kari could still remember watching the stately Parkson standing quietly, her big smile and sparkling white teeth radiant against her dark skin. And Kari could still hear and remember her opening words, "The American people, and most of the world, have decided, with an unprecedented agreement – politically, scientifically and economically – that the tipping point of climate change is both real and rapidly approaching, if not already here."

As the Patel family watched the SOTU, Jennifer, who had recently won re-election to the Massachusetts State House of

Representatives, explained that with control of all branches of the government, the new, progressive – and diverse – party had been able to push through unthinkable programs, new industries, and new tax codes to help pay for them.

Still, to say that everyone in every country believed in the urgency of the earth's problems would be a gross over-statement. But enough people in almost every country did. They were experiencing, first-hand, the ravages of climate change: unprecedented illness, food shortages, freezing winters, and then...

In the summer of 2045, came the horror in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia: a heatwave of such length and intensity, it killed almost half the city. The world was in shock as it watched the photos posted online by the desperate Saudi residents as they pleaded for help. The air temperature climbed to 139 degrees Fahrenheit for seven days, accompanied by a sandstorm of enormous size and intensity. People could not leave their homes. The air was too hot to breathe, and the sand made being outside impossible. (Survival time for a human being begins to decrease drastically at around 130°F). The combination of heat taxing the electrical grids and sand clogging up virtually everything had effectively shut down much of the entire country's electrical output.

Many families ran out of food and relief airdrops were impossible because of the sandstorm. Those foolish enough to attempt to drive away from this oven found themselves tragically trapped in their cars when they needed to recharge or refuel. The traffic jams turned the main roads into graveyards, complete with sand covering the four-wheeled tombs.

With hindsight, people realized that this nightmare had plenty of warning signs. As far back as 2010, Jeddah had recorded a day of 126°F degrees in the sun. But days like those were considered "isolated incidents" until this.

Worse still, when it was over, the flood of refugees fleeing Jeddah and other desert cities was overwhelming, compounding the

problems, and causing the misery to spread to still more countries. Switzerland was overrun by the Saudi ruling classes, and the home countries of guest workers – who comprised more than eighty percent of the Middle East’s population – struggled to accommodate the returning survivors.

Finally, leaders around the world knew they had to do something. There were a few foreign governments that were slow to engage, but as the illnesses and death tolls in their countries continued to rise – effectively shutting down their industries – they were forced to “get with the program.”

Still, there was hope. The world had witnessed temporary reductions in carbon emissions during the massive shutdowns resulting from the series of virus pandemics. So they knew it was possible to make an impact if everyone worked together with a sustainable effort. But until now, each recovery was built on the use of fossil fuels.

Angela Parkson was determined to save the world, and there were some good reasons to think she could beat the odds and succeed. The stakes couldn’t be higher.

In her address, Parkson introduced what was undoubtedly the largest and most comprehensive global program ever. A cooperative public-private partnership, administered through an effort called SHARE, would create new environmental industries to cope with the rapidly evolving climate change. The Survival, Health, and Revitalization Effort, based at CalTech in Pasadena, CA., was already underway.

She continued with details of the program while a rapt audience, both in the House Chamber and across the world, watched and listened from their disparate viewpoints.

“For years, we politicians have promised that developing new green industries would create millions of jobs. Many of my predecessors

were ridiculed for what were deemed impractical dreams, and with our constant gridlocks in government, no one knew if they would work. SHARE will show the world that it can. Climate change is not a regional phenomenon; and while there are geographic differences, my fellow leaders and I, as well as a great number of scientists and engineers, believe that SHARE will work for everyone. We also agree that the global threat that we face demands that every country joins in and that we succeed.”

It was true that nature was battering life on earth and each new year seemed to establish new records for the number and ferocity of hurricanes, tornadoes, typhoons, cyclones, floods, and heatwaves. Just last year, Kari had watched two devastating, back-to-back hurricanes on TV, “Danielle” and “Earl.” Each took a different course – Danielle hit southern Florida and veered up the Gulf Coast, leaving a trail of devastation that made the previous worst hurricane to hit that area, Katrina, look like a strong breeze knocking over some lawn chairs. Hot on its heels was Earl, which decided to hit pretty much every town up Florida’s eastern seaboard. And of course, they both pummeled Puerto Rico. Just last month, Kari experienced the incredible snowstorms that hit the Boston area and she heard, and shared, the fears and concerns of her neighbors and fellow citizens. Record storm size and intensity were becoming the norm in every region of the world, every year.

The president explained that perhaps the most spectacular development to come out of SHARE would be the ability to “dome” entire cities or areas, filtering out UV rays and pollution through the use of photovoltaic panels. More accurately, cities would be covered and protected by a series of domes, enclosed corridor connectors, and tunnels. She used the domes of Dubai from 2020 as a visual sneak peek into the future; however, she explained, that the technology employed in the new domes was light years ahead.

They would be temperature-controlled and were highly efficient solar collectors, generating significant volumes of electricity. Collectively, the power generated by these new domes and other innovative

technologies would be sufficient to eliminate fossil fuels, helping to begin the healing process of the environment.

Injecting a practical, “what’s in it for me” message, Parkson talked about job creation and the economy. “SHARE will provide millions of jobs throughout the country and the world, boosting employment and income for both families and governments.

“We intend that this program will be incorporated into university curricula to prepare graduates for the new skills required by these millions of new jobs. No one with a real desire to work will be left out.”

And in a message aimed at both her U.S. and global audiences, she added, “For the past four years, the USA has been developing and consolidating our environmental expertise and we are determined to reestablish our leadership position, not as the world’s policemen, but as responsible partners to help everyone who wants and needs our assistance.

“SHARE will be the largest and most ambitious infrastructure project in the history of the world. It must succeed.”

Edinburg, Pennsylvania. Less than six hundred miles to the west, seven people were gathered in the spacious living room of Grover Nerdkist II. They were watching the SOTU, and they realized that they were also watching any hope of ever regaining control of the levers of power disappear – if Parkson succeeded.

They were strange bedfellows, to be sure, but they were united in their intent to stop this effort as soon as possible and by whatever means it took. And they had some ideas. Some very big ideas.

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