

Alex, it turned out, was a makeup artist as well as an electronics expert. He had transformed Serena into some kind of avant-garde librarian, with cat-eye spectacles and a floral-print dress that might have come from a 1950 Sears Roebuck catalog if it had been a little less form-fitting. It matched the flowered hat with the microphone perfectly. Blue, in a stroke of genius, had been done up as a white-faced mime, complete with bowler hat and a plastic lapel flower that squirted water. Now, Alex was putting the finishing touches on Blake.

“All set?”

Blake looked at himself in the mirror one last time, then nodded. “I think I’m running out of personalities, though.” His nose was augmented with putty, his skin had been died a deep olive, and he’d sprouted a short, dark beard. With the addition of his bush hat, Blake’s latest disguise was complete.

As the appointed time drew nearer, the tension in the apartment mounted. Mac made a point of burning incense and playing recordings of indigenous South American folk songs, featuring a variety of flutes and gentle rain sounds. In the kitchen, Gully had turned on a small television. Wandering in, Blake found him watching a local newscast intently. The correspondent was standing outside the New York UZ entrance. In the background, Blake could see the white tent where the religious group had been gathered when he first arrived. Where the scene had been calm and orderly before, the area was now crowded and chaotic, with many more people milling about. In the background, a low chant could be heard: *“Kill the Devil’s music!...Kill the Devil’s music!”*

“We’re talking with Reverend Val Lawson, one of the leaders of ‘God’s Voice in Protest.’ They’ve been gathered on this spot since the start of UZFest ’24, several days ago,” the correspondent said. “Reverend Lawson, your group has been the model of good behavior up until now. But clearly, the atmosphere is becoming more charged. Can you assure us things won’t get out of hand?”

“I think people are understandably upset that the government permits this festival of paganism and, frankly, Satanism, to go on, year after year,” said the minister hoarsely. “No one wants disorder. But if

there is trouble, it will be the government's responsibility for allowing this untenable situation to exist."

"So, you're not guaranteeing you can control your organization?" the correspondent asked.

"It's not up to me..." the Reverend's voice trailed off as shouting erupted behind him. The camera swung to record a knot of screaming protesters being pushed against the cyclone fence by a group of police officers. "Excuse me," he said. "I have to go."

Gully switched off the TV with a grimace. "Looks like the circus just gained another sideshow."

Before they headed out to the park, Gully drew Blue aside. "As promised, our friend has been in touch," he said softly.

"What does he have?"

"He was very detailed. I've mapped it all out for you." Blue leaned over the paper Gully was holding. "The uniformed detail will assemble at this point, here. Their plan is to deploy along these lines, shortly before Fish begins to speak. There are also going to be sizeable groups of Federal undercover operatives located in each of the indicated spots. Our people should be able to identify them by their earpieces."

"Good. I've already touched base with all our people," said Blue tersely. "I'll start spreading the word as soon as we hit the street."



"I have an absolutely awful feeling about this—I wish you would simply cancel the speech!"

Maxwell Fish looked at his wife and sighed. As a former legal counsel to the Senate Judiciary Committee, Beth wasn't ordinarily one to shrink from a fight, and he trusted her instincts implicitly. But this was one time he couldn't follow her advice.

"That's impossible, my love," he said gently. "First, if I turned down this opportunity, I'd badly weaken whatever legal case I have. Second, I've been sitting on this information for too long as it is. This is the time to get this out—we both know that."

“Why can’t we follow the alternate plan, and let our friends in the media handle everything? It’ll be just as big a story that way.”

Fish shook his head. “We’ve discussed this already. If the public learns about this secondhand, it will give the right-wing media time to pick it apart, start smearing the source and me, begin dropping innuendoes about phony recordings and hidden motives. No, this has to come straight from my mouth.”

“But your speech isn’t being broadcast...”

“There will be plenty of journalists there to report on it. We’ll also have transcripts available for the press. There are even likely to be a few people out there with illegal recording devices, although of course I can’t condone that.”

“I know all that.” His wife shivered. “I just have a premonition. There’s something in the air. Something malevolent...”

Fish glanced at the closed door leading to the living room, where his four-man Secret Service contingent was stationed—ostensibly to protect him but also, he knew, to help ensure he didn’t violate the conditions of his house arrest.

“We have to trust that things will work out,” he said quietly. “The future of our country hinges on this. That’s far more important than the fate of one individual.”

Jim Marshall’s voice came from the other side of the door. “Time to get going, Governor!” Elizabeth Fish grasped her husband’s hand tightly.

“I love you so much,” she whispered.

“I love you too, darling,” he said, squeezing her hand in return. “Have faith.”



Martin Bibbitt’s hand was trembling as he punched the buttons on the pay phone. “It’s a green light,” he told the man who answered. “You can move forward with both assignments.”

“Understood,” said the man. “We’ll proceed as planned.”

“One more thing,” said Bibbitt. “I want to send a personal message to Topic A. When that little bastard sees the end in sight, I want him