

## **Praise for *Deep State***

'*Deep State* is a propulsive, page-turning, compelling, fragmentation grenade of a debut thriller.'

**C.J. Box, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Wolf Pack* and *The Bitterroots***

'The plot of Chris Hauty's *Deep State* rings eerily true in a novel that will keep you turning the pages well into the night. Be warned, you might not look at newspaper headlines the same way come morning. In a country with a government of the people, by the people and for the people, is the Deep State really pulling the strings?'

**Jack Carr, former Navy SEAL and acclaimed author of *The Terminal List* and *True Believer***

'Hauty provides a fresh twist on the American patriot. Hayley Chill has what it takes to carve out her place in today's thriller scene. She's shrewd, fierce, and always lands the blow that puts her on top.'

**Kyle Mills, #1 *New York Times* bestselling author of *Red War* and *Lethal Agent***

'Jarring . . . intriguing . . . the ending seems pulled directly from a movie.' **Booklist**

'*Deep State* is a modern-day whodunnit set in the political morass that is current Washington, DC. Riveting and engrossing with an atypical protagonist, it keeps you guessing until the final pages are turned. Chris Hauty has just placed a marker in the world of political thrillers.'

**Matthew Betley, acclaimed author of *Rules of War***

'Engrossing . . . kick-ass.' ***Publishers Weekly***



**DEEP STATE**



# DEEP STATE

A THRILLER



# CHRIS HAUTY



SIMON &  
SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

A CBS COMPANY

First published in the United States by Emily Bestler Books/Atria Books,  
an imprint of Simon & Schuster, Inc.

First published in Great Britain by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2018  
A CBS COMPANY

Copyright © Chris Hauty, 2020

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention.

No reproduction without permission.

® and © 1997 Simon & Schuster, Inc. All rights reserved.

The right of Chris Hauty to be identified as author of this work  
has been asserted in accordance with sections 77 and  
78 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd  
1st Floor  
222 Gray's Inn Road  
London WC1X 8HB

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney  
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

[www.simonandschuster.co.uk](http://www.simonandschuster.co.uk)  
[www.simonandschuster.com.au](http://www.simonandschuster.com.au)  
[www.simonandschuster.co.in](http://www.simonandschuster.co.in)



A catalogue record for this  
book is available from the  
National Library of Australia

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-4711-9199-2

eBook ISBN: 978-1-4711-9200-5

Audio ISBN: 978-1-4711-9109-1

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either  
a product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance  
to actual people living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Typeset by Midland Typesetters, Australia. Printed and bound in Australia by Griffin Press.



The paper this book is printed on is certified  
against the Forest Stewardship Council®  
Standards. Griffin Press holds FSC chain  
of custody certification SGS-COC-005088.  
FSC promotes environmentally responsible,  
socially beneficial and economically viable  
management of the world's forests.

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd are committed to sourcing paper  
that is made from wood grown in sustainable forests and support the Forest  
Stewardship Council, the leading international forest certification organisation.  
Our books displaying the FSC logo are printed on FSC certified paper.

*For George and Jackson*





A lady asked Dr. Franklin, “Well, Doctor, what have we got,  
a republic or a monarchy?”

“A republic,” replied the Doctor, “if you can keep it.”

—Anonymous, from Farrand’s *Records of  
the Federal Convention of 1787*



**DEEP STATE**





## MONROE PEOPLE

**T**he WMATA Metrobus 38B crosses the Potomac on the Francis Scott Key Bridge, turning east on M Street and traversing a fitfully elegant Georgetown. Heading southeast and transitioning onto Pennsylvania Avenue, the city bus crosses Rock Creek and fully engages the brooding, low-slung metropolis that is the nation's capital. Hayley Chill, wearing a white blouse and ruffled hem cardigan from Dressbarn with dark straight-leg trousers and functional pumps, has claimed a window seat near the front of the bus. Her straw-colored hair has grown out from Fort Hood days, styled on a budget at Diego's Hair Salon on Q Street. JanSport bag on her lap, she is barely recognizable as the triumphant and bloodied boxer in the ring or subdued soldier in crisp service uniform mustering out

of the army. Whatever the metamorphic process she has undergone in the fifteen months since saying goodbye to Stanley Oakes at the Killen bus depot, it has transformed Hayley Chill into an accurate facsimile of a DC worker bee.

It is 7:08 a.m. in late November and the weather clings stubbornly to Indian summer. Passing sights they've seen hundreds of times before, all other passengers on the bus are engrossed by handheld devices or asleep. But Hayley has ridden the 38B only once before, one week earlier, on a test run after signing the lease on a studio apartment just across the Potomac in Rosslyn, Virginia. Despite having grown up only a six-hour drive from Washington, DC, the city and its monuments are entirely new to her. She gazes out the window, gathering impressions of the passing city with the keen attention of a cultural anthropologist.

As the Metrobus eases to the curb at the southeast corner of Farragut Square, its last stop, Hayley disembarks with a dozen other passengers. The familiarity of another workday is etched on the bored faces of those stepping off the bus. Only Hayley moves with a surplus of energy and a brisk, five-minute walk south on Seventeenth Street brings the President's Park into view. She pauses on the sidewalk to take in the iconic sight. The White House, partially obscured by fern-leaf beech, American elm, and white oak, impresses her as both splendidly grand and surprisingly modest at the same time. She knows the building's original architect was Irish-born. She has memorized the names of every senior aide and their phone extensions. Somehow she has even ascertained what flavor ice cream the president is said to prefer. Unsurprisingly, Hayley Chill has arrived for her first day of internship at the White House completely and thoroughly prepared.

A gatehouse opposite the EEOB controls entry into the White House complex, and Hayley joins the long queue there. The

majority of staffers waiting in line have green badges on lanyards. Many fewer, including Hayley, possess blue badges. The young Park Police officer who performs the initial screening accepts her driver's license and checks it against her badge. He has warm eyes and a folksy grin.

"West Virginia, huh? I grew up in Lewisburg." His voice possesses the familiar twang of Hayley's tribe.

She nods. "Lewisburg. Sure. Nice."

"Blue badge," the Park Police officer remarks with surprised regard. He hands her ID back and gestures behind him, toward the White House complex. "Ready for the viper pit?"

Hayley laughs. "I hope so!"

The policeman waves her through the gate. "You have yourself a pleasant day, Ms. Chill."

She offers her hand. "Hayley, but you already know that."

He nods, shaking her hand. "Ned." Hayley continues forward as the line of people waiting for ID check lengthens behind her.

Once cleared through security screening, she and other arriving personnel are waved through an aggressive, final series of barriers and frowning Park Police. As instructed by email, Hayley passes through the Eisenhower Executive Office Building and continues outside, onto West Executive Avenue. Nearly all interns receive green badges, designating their access as being limited to more prosaic confines of the Eisenhower building. Hayley's blue badge allows her to breeze past the Secret Service agents monitoring access between the EEOB and the White House's West Wing.

Hayley enters the West Wing through a door on the ground floor. She is older than the typical White House intern by at least five years. Her serious expression is evidence of a life lived without favor or entitlement. Self-delusion is a luxury she could never afford. Even as an eight-year-old sitting on the lap of a Charleston department

store Santa reeking of Camel cigarettes and boiled onions, Hayley could tell a fake beard when she saw one. Nor is she unduly overwhelmed here, within these historic walls of the president's house.

Hayley pauses just inside the entryway to get her bearings, the plastic encasing her blue badge shiny and unscuffed. A passing man, cowboy handsome and wearing a dark suit, perceives Hayley's plight. "New intern?"

"That obvious, huh?" Hayley's demeanor is friendly and matter-of-fact. The Secret Service agent knows from experience that most new interns are like kindergartners on their first day of school, breathless and wide-eyed. For that reason alone, this young woman impresses him. He gestures toward her credentials. "They teach us how to decipher those doodads, oddly enough."

"I feel safer already," Hayley says, smiling.

"Whose office?"

"Peter Hall."

"I've heard of him," he responds sarcastically. He indicates a nearby stairwell door, but his hazel eyes remain on Hayley. "One flight up, go right, then right again. First door on your left. Can't miss it."

Hayley nods curtly, signaling she's got it from here. The Secret Service agent is disappointed their encounter is over so quickly but covers with a wink, continuing on his way.

There have always been pretty boys on the periphery of Hayley's life. Back home in Lincoln County, a roundelay of aggressive suitors vied for kiss, grope, or better from the most desirable girl for miles. Charlie Hadden, All-Conference quarterback and proud possessor of a cherry 1964 Pontiac GTO, hung in long enough to earn the mantle of Hayley's high school boyfriend but too much Smirnoff and a hairpin curve on Sproul Road ended his tenure, and he died before she could gain what she had at long last decided to take. Hayley wore black for two months, fetchingly so in the opinion of would-be replacements.



Enlistment followed high school graduation by twenty-four hours, a day in which Hayley relinquished her virginity to a twenty-eight-year-old drifter who wrote love songs, had a mutt dog with a face like Bukowski, and played a pretty wicked twelve-string guitar. After that underwhelming initiation to the world of sex, Hayley had chosen to never attach herself to a steady mate. Her priorities were other than romantic love, namely seeing that there was a roof kept over the heads of her younger siblings and food on the table. Nearly every penny of her army pay was sent back home. Pay scales are higher for infantry soldiers, all the inducement Hayley needed toward becoming one of the first eighteen women to earn her blue cord.

Once she's climbed the stairs to the first floor, Hayley finds herself in a carpeted corridor that muffles the footsteps of dozens of staffers and personnel hustling to and fro as if the nation's business really is important work. None pay the slightest notice to the new intern. Hayley threads her way along the corridor, dodging other staffers, and stops outside a door like all the others. On the wall to the left is a surprisingly unostentatious placard that identifies the office as belonging to the White House chief of staff.

Pushing the door open, Hayley ventures into the suite's reception area. No one is inside the compact room. The single, curtained window boasts a commanding view of the North Lawn and Lafayette Square beyond. An oil painting of a three-master blasting through a white-capped tempest hangs above the couch. Lights blink silently across an impressive phone console on the receptionist's desk. With no receptionist to offer guidance, Hayley is unsure what to do. She hears voices drifting from the partially open interior door.

Crossing the room, Hayley stops just inside the doorway leading into the suite's primary office and observes sixty-three-year-old Peter Hall, wearing a suit jacket and tie, sitting behind a large desk and surrounded by a nervous litter of aides and assistants. The White

House chief of staff has a black phone receiver pressed to his ear, barking into it as he scans papers held before him by his courtiers. In jarring contrast to his august work space, Hall's voice possesses the timbre of a high school football coach from west Texas, which in fact he once was before running for the state's Twenty-Third Congressional District and winning in an improbable landslide.

Representation of a mostly Hispanic constituency of five hundred thousand souls offered only modest horizons for an idealistically charged, ambitious former All-American tight end and only son of a Korean War veteran. Over the years, however, Peter Hall paid his political dues and amassed influence extending far beyond the dusty Twenty-Third district in Texas, stretching to every corner of the nation and beyond. But there are limits to power and prestige even for one of the highest-ranking politicians on Capitol Hill. Congress makes laws. The executive branch makes history.

Hall's salvation came in the form of Richard Monroe's stunning victory in the previous year's presidential election. The president-elect yielded to Hall's persistent lobbying and plucked him from the House of Representatives, installing him as chief of staff of a West Wing in need of congressional expertise. The president, an actual war hero, was the embodiment of the electorate's craving for change in Washington and possessed the necessary gravitas to inspire that political revolution. But as political neophyte, he hadn't the legislative tools to effect his controversial agenda. Every great president needs a Peter Hall, that skilled mechanic who operates belowdecks and keeps the engine's machinery running.

Hall couldn't be happier with his role of president's loyal consigliere. There are only two directions on the chief of staff's moral compass: the president's way and the wrong way. Hall's fervent opinion is that Richard Monroe is America's last and best chance for survival as a democratic superpower. Political opponents, congressional

naysayers, critics in the media, and hostile foreign powers are to be methodically destroyed, ignored, or neutralized. If Monroe simplified some of the complexities on certain issues and ironed away nuance with language his base could easily comprehend, so be it. No other political leader has come close in the last hundred years to furthering the basics of a party's political agenda. The time to strike the iron was now.

"Senator, the president is in fact the leader of your goddamn party and expects the votes he needs for passage of this bill!" Hall bellows into the phone, pausing for the unfortunate recipient of this abuse to fumble a reply, then resuming his tirade with even greater amounts of venom. "Hell yes, I'm shouting, 'cause you're clearly not hearing me, Senator! The other side is throwing every fucking thing they've got into obliterating our mandate, and the goddamn media is passing them the ammunition!"

As Hall continues to verbally pummel the unnamed senator into submission, one of his aides glances in the direction of the doorway, where Hayley stands. Karen Rey, midthirties and furiously raven haired, with a master's in English literature from UVA and a Bedlington terrier back home named Churchill, reacts with outraged expression to the unknown young woman's presence in the gaping doorway.

Rey stands fully erect and darts across the expansive office, a Scud missile headed directly toward Hayley. She confronts the White House newcomer, and her question is neither gentle nor rhetorical. "Are you insane or just stupid?"

Hayley's gaze is unwavering. Her voice is firm and clear. "Hayley Chill, ma'am. I'm interning for the chief of staff's office."

Rey sizes up Hayley with an incredulous gawk; the intern's West Virginia drawl is often mistaken by some as a sign of slow-wittedness and unsophistication. Rey thrusts out her hand.

"Let me see your paperwork," she snaps.

Hayley complies, retrieving the pertinent documents from her backpack. Rey briefly peruses the paperwork, arching her eyes in mild surprise.

“Military veteran?”

Hayley is used to such reaction to her military status. With her trim build and pretty face, she could easily be mistaken for a performer with Disney On Ice or a retired beauty queen. “Third Cavalry Regiment, ma’am. Forty-Third Combat Engineer Company,” she informs the White House aide and intern wrangler.

“No college degree?”

“Two years at Central Texas College, ma’am, on the Active Duty Montgomery GI Bill.”

Rey looks up from Hayley’s paperwork and offers it back as if it were drenched in biohazard.

“The West Wing operates at a grueling pace, Ms. Chill, especially with this administration. No disrespect to your community college, but perhaps the First Lady’s office would be a better fit.” Her condescension is not gratuitous. Peter Hall’s persecution of the slightest incompetence is of DC lore. Hayley’s first significant flub would be on Rey’s head.

“Thank you, ma’am, but I believe I’m up to the task. Mr. Hall must think so, too.” Hayley flips to the last page of her sheaf of papers and offers it for Rey to see. “That’s his signature right there.”

Karen Rey’s expression goes flat. She silently leads Hayley back into the reception room and to the entry door. Stepping out into the corridor, she points toward the near stairwell as if casting a fallen angel from the heavens. “Interns live, work, and die downstairs.” Pronouncement issued, Rey turns and retreats back inside Hall’s office suite, closing the door behind her with an emphatic push.

---

HAYLEY ARRIVES BACK where she started, on the West Wing's ground floor, and locates the correct office door, a handwritten sign designating it as "CoS Support." Entering, Hayley discovers a room not much bigger than a janitorial closet, which in fact it was until only a few months before. Peter Hall wanted his interns close at hand, located in the West Wing, and being the chief of staff, that's exactly what he got. Four desks are jigsawed into the claustrophobic space, three of which are occupied with sharply dressed young people. The fourth desk, Hayley's apparent work space, is heaped with files and binders, an impressive and disorderly pile two feet high.

The other interns, two-week veterans of the West Wing, regard Hayley with cold suspicion. CoS Support has been their exclusive domain, and Hayley is an unwelcome addition. What possible good could come of her joining the team? At best, the blue-eyed, blond-haired young woman wearing an off-the-rack Dressbarn cardigan represents an annoyance. At worst, she is potential competition. The goal of any White House intern is to be noticed, achieving special recognition at the expense of the several dozen other young people toiling there. A glowing personal recommendation from a powerful DC player is of incalculable value in scoring admission to Ivy League graduate programs, entry positions at Goldman Sachs, or further advancement in Washington.

Luke Charles, the only male in CoS Support, is a junior at Georgetown with the obligatory major in political science. His father, a fantastically wealthy hedge fund manager, hopes Luke's interest in politics is a phase his son will soon leave behind. In the elder Charles's view, politicians follow while money leads. Luke will indeed come to this same conclusion in the coming year. The grubbiness and panhandling that defines every politician's life doesn't escape the notice of the sufficiently bright Luke. After graduation from Georgetown and an MBA from Harvard, he will

join his father's firm and notch his first seven-figure annual bonus before he's thirty.

Sophia Watts, her desk abutting Hayley's, is barely receiving the required grade point average to avoid expulsion from USC, having spent much of her first two college years trolling Los Angeles's hottest clubs. In Sophia's second sophomore semester and still an undeclared major, she had a two-week-long Tinder fling with an aide of a Los Angeles councilperson. Landon was a sweet and fun-loving boy who infused an impressionable Sophia with a passion for government. Given this newfound purpose, her father, a successful film producer of cacophonous superhero movies, used his clout to score his only daughter a highly coveted internship at the White House. Sophia's future love child with a Senate minority leader will result in moderate infamy and a best-selling memoir, a literary sensation that, synergistically, will be adapted by her movie-producing father into a scorching independent film. Daughter will join father onstage at the Oscar ceremony for a Best Picture acceptance speech.

The third intern in the room, commanding the biggest and best-positioned desk, is Becca Byran. With a lion's mane of dirty-blond hair, she is a recent graduate from NYU under an accelerated program. Her father owns a small print shop in Queens, on Myrtle Avenue. Her mother is stay-at-home, taking in neighborhood toddlers for day care. Burning deep within Becca is an obsession to rise above these modest origins and apply her fierce drive to amassing power in whatever form it might exist. In seven years' time, she will be the founder of a rapidly expanding, quasi-religious "commune" located in Vermont. Within the decade, Becca Byran will begin an eight-year stretch at FCI Danbury for bank fraud, money laundering, and tax evasion.

"What's your name?" Becca demands of the newcomer, weaponizing that brief, normally innocuous sentence.

“Hayley Chill.”

Becca slides a look toward the other two interns seated at their respective desks. Her expression is difficult to gauge. Sophia takes a stab at decoding the alpha intern’s judgment of the new addition to CoS Support.

“Can’t be for real, right?” Sophia asks. Becca shrugs in response.

“Where is that accent from? Kentucky?” Luke asks Hayley.

“West Virginia.” Hayley indicates the desk nearest to the door, currently being used as a file dumping ground. “Guessing this is where I sit?”

Becca is again regarding Hayley with cool, analytic precision, taking measure of the threat level posed by the newcomer and how she might be manipulated to personal advantage. “We’re under a lot of pressure, if you didn’t notice. Sit there if you must, but don’t mess any of that stuff up.”

Hayley doesn’t respond. The unfriendly and unwelcoming attitude of the other interns doesn’t much bother her. The other interns just seem to be kids, not worth her time or energy. Hayley places her bag on the floor and, ignoring Becca’s admonition, begins to organize the mess of folders and papers on the desk.

“You look kinda old,” Sophia tells Hayley. “Where do you go to school?”

Hayley continues to work as she answers Sophia’s prying question. “Two-year community college in Texas, near where I was stationed.” Their blank faces prompt her to add, “Believe me, you’ve never heard of this place.”

The three other interns exchange a communal look of bewilderment.

“Stationed?” Becca demands clarification with distaste.

Like most civilian Americans, none of the other interns have had any personal interaction with an actual serviceperson, let alone

set foot on a military installation. That ignorance does not stop them from forming the near-universal bias against military personnel. This prejudice prompts all three college-educated interns to share an opinion that a US Army veteran, particularly one who enlisted, is of subpar intelligence, backward thinking, and perhaps psychopathic. Why else join the military if not a hopeless loser with mental issues?

Hayley has encountered this sort of prejudice since her earliest days in the army. Typically, she wouldn't bother justifying to anyone what was a profoundly transformative life experience. But, in this instance, encouraging the cooperation and affinity of her fellow interns strikes her as important. "Enlisted out of high school, discharged about a year ago," she tells the others. "And here I am."

"But I thought . . . ?" Sophia's question dies in midsentence.

Becca lays it out for the USC girl's benefit. "White House interns must be a current college student, recent grad, or veteran with high school diploma." With that explanation, the judgment of the intern kangaroo court is final. Hayley is nothing but a carbon-based organism taking up valuable space and time. On first sight, Luke had privately mused on the potential of fucking Hayley, her sex appeal undeniable. Knowing what he does now, however, the Georgetown student decides to keep his focus on the brighter sparkle of Sophia. Luke instinctually assesses that his dad would have a shit fit if he took up with this baby-killing white trash from West Virginia.

As Hayley continues organizing her work space, the other interns utterly ignore her. Not one says another word to Hayley the entire day. Luke departs first, at four thirty, for an appointment with a personal trainer at an Equinox on NW Twenty-Second Street. Sophia and Becca leave together at 6:05 p.m. for a double drinks date with two congressional pages at Black Jack near Logan Circle. Hayley's workday, therefore, ends peacefully and gloriously alone.



She finishes organizing the pile of documents on her desk, then turns to other stacks of position papers, memos, and briefing binders stacked throughout the cluttered office. At eight forty-five that night, her work is finally complete. The CoS Support office has been meticulously organized. Hayley puts on her jacket, turns off the lights, and begins her commute via the 38B Metrobus to her modest intern housing at the Henry House.

---

AFTER A WEEK and a half in the West Wing, Hayley has yet to leave the former janitorial closet. History may be made in the White House, but the real action might as well be happening on Mars for all Hayley knows. Her primary duties and responsibilities have consisted of maintaining the organization she had brought to the interns' office and preventing it from sliding back into a persistent chaos. Becca, Luke, and Sophia are perfectly satisfied with this new arrangement. The West Virginian's diligence has allowed them to cherry-pick assignments while receiving glowing performance reports for work actually done by the newcomer. In effect, Hayley is the interns' intern.

Karen Rey occasionally drops by for a few minutes but deals exclusively with Becca, who has achieved this elite status through sheer force of personality and Machiavellian cunning. Luke and Sophia never really had a chance. Since their first encounter in Hall's office suite, Rey has exchanged only a few desultory words with Hayley. Confined to the CoS Support office, the West Virginian toils in abject anonymity, a real-life Cinderella. If there's a silver lining to her exploitation, it's that the other interns rarely include Hayley in their feckless chatter.

Their immediate task on this particular morning is responding to emails sent to POTUS, electronic missives that range from outraged

condemnation to idolizing approval of administration accomplishments, real and imagined. Whatever the category, each email receives the same cordial and appreciative reply. Even messages threatening harm toward the president are given respectful response while simultaneously being forwarded to the Secret Service. The volume of these disturbing missives fluctuates, depending on the news of the day and latest presidential statement or action. The record for actionable emails was set one week earlier, after Monroe gave a speech at a national VFW meeting in which he attacked NATO as a relic of twentieth-century geopolitics having no relevance to a twenty-first-century world. In proposing an alternative, eastern European alliance reflective of the new world order, Monroe generated a total of thirty-five active threats in the span of twenty-four hours, all of which were meticulously investigated by the Secret Service.

But answering emails isn't met with abundant enthusiasm. Becca, in particular, is feeling underutilized, her ambitions roadblocked. Frustrated, she shakes her head in disbelief as she types. "Freaking morons are driving me crazy! This lady wants POTUS to help her son get a liver transplant. What does she expect Monroe to do, invade Mexico and harvest some?!"

"That's actually not such a bad idea," Luke muses, already attuned to exploitative opportunities in every facet of human existence. He doesn't know it yet, but he'll prove to be an even more successful hedge fund manager than his dad.

Sophia is more cursory in her response to the emails, with replies reading more like Zen koans. Some of these marvels of epistolary brevity have been printed and tacked to the office bulletin board. "Sir, the President appreciates the concerns of every citizen of this great country but cannot discern exactly the nature of yours. God totally bless the United States of America" was an early example. In straightening up the interns' office, Hayley had considered

taking down Sophia's little gems, but even she had to appreciate their value as morale boosters and left them in place.

"I might as well be doing product support at Apple and actually get paid for my talents," Sophia surmised, resisting a habit of reminding the others that her semi-famous father once hosted Steve Jobs for dinner. On that occasion, the Apple founder gifted a ten-year-old Sophia with the first model iPhone before the device's official release, an event Sophia naturally mentions in telling the story.

"It's either this or studying for the GREs. Frankly, I'll take this," confesses Luke, reflecting his country-club work ethic.

Becca glances toward Hayley, who has been quietly loading briefing binders. The job is not without its significance, and the other interns have come to rely on the flawlessly conscientious military veteran to handle the job.

"What about you, G.I. Jane? What's your plan B?"

Hayley is surprised to be included in the discussion. Her response doesn't require meditation. "Long as I can serve my country, I'm good."

The other interns exchange a look, barely restraining their guffaws. Before one of them can get off a snarky remark, however, there is a quick rap at the door, and it's pushed open, revealing White House Chief of Staff Peter Hall. Without his suit jacket, Hall is in roll-up-your-sleeves work mode.

Becca, Sophia, and Luke freeze, not quite believing their eyes. The chief of staff has never stopped by the ground-floor support office. As a matter of fact, none of them have exchanged more than a few words with Hall besides expected pleasantries. He certainly doesn't know any of them by name.

"Staff's jammed. Need someone for fifteen minutes," Hall announces, needlessly adding, "not another second more than that, I promise."

Luke, Sophia, and Becca all stand in unison, but the NYU grad finds her voice first. "I'm available, Mr. Hall!"

Hall glances around the room, ignoring Becca's declaration. "Which one of you is the army vet?"

Hayley raises her hand to half-mast. "That's me, sir. Hayley Chill."

Hall's normally fierce demeanor instantly softens when he turns his gaze on Hayley. "Chill? Sure. How the hell could I forget a name like that? Fort Hood base commander wrote your letter of recommendation. Among the first females to gender-integrate the infantry. History making, General MacFarland said. Hell of a boxer, too."

"Yes, sir. Honored to serve in any capacity."

Hall fancies himself an ear for regional accents, not without justification. "Kanawha County, West Virginia?"

Hayley grins. "Pretty close, sir. Green Shoals, Lincoln County."

Watching Hayley interact with the chief of staff, Becca knows she has lost a major battle here, though the war is far from over. Sophia and Luke's game is strictly two-dimensional, and they don't even realize the contest is over for them. Becca now understands that this was a two-man race from day one of Hayley's arrival. Underscoring that point, Hall's focus remains exclusively on the West Virginian.

"Your father, he made the ultimate sacrifice?"

"Yes, sir. Bravo Company from Marine Corps Reserve's First Battalion, Twenty-Third Regiment. Second Battle of Fallujah. Killed in action at Blackwater Bridge, sir, when I was eight. My mom raised us six kids slingin' grits and black coffee at a Shoney's in Charleston, up until she got sick herself."

Hall nods, sagely, recognizing the backstory. "Monroe people," he assesses approvingly.

"Yes, sir. The president is very popular back home."

Without a glance toward the other three interns, Hall crooks his finger and tilts his head toward the door. “Let’s go. Not enough hours in the day to save a country.”

Hayley stands and follows Hall out the door, leaving Becca, Sophia, and Luke to exchange looks of stunned misery.

Hall leads Hayley up the stairwell and down the corridor to his office suite. The reception area is empty except for his primary assistant seated at her desk, running traffic control on the office phones. “No calls or interruptions for fifteen minutes,” Hall barks at his assistant as he strides past. Hayley follows him into his office.

She gestures behind her. “Door closed, sir?”

“Leave it.” Hall picks up a sheaf of papers from his desk and thrusts the papers at Hayley, indicating a chair opposite his desk. “Sit.”

Hayley takes the pages and briefly scans them.

“The president’s speech in Ohio Saturday on national security,” Hall informs her, sitting on the corner of his desk with arms folded across his chest. Through the window behind his desk, the Washington Monument looms. “Read. I want to hear it.”

Hayley glances down at the pages for no more than five seconds, then looks back up to Hall.

“This is a time, my fellow Americans, when we must reach within ourselves and discover the essential strength of our convictions. We must recall the lessons taught to us by our elders, ones that spoke to ideals that once made this great country—”

Hall raises a hand, stopping her recitation. “Bullshit.”

“Sir?”

Hall gestures for the speech transcript impatiently. Hayley hands the pages back to the chief of staff.

Hall asks, “Photographic memory part of army training now?”

“Fortunately, sir, my recall has always been pretty good.”

As a child, Hayley did not begin to speak until the age of two but then spoke in complete sentences and was reading by the age of four. It was her second-grade teacher who first discerned Hayley's photographic memory. On a field trip to the local park, Hayley had flawlessly recited the birthdays of every student in class by recalling the dates written on a homeroom poster. As it developed, Hayley realized her eidetic memory wasn't limited to visual aspects of memory but also included auditory memory and other sensory stimuli associated with a visual image. Sensitive to the freakish nature of this gift, she downplays its significance to the point of obscuring it unless exposure is absolutely necessary.

"Fantastic. How good are you at forgetting it?" Hall unceremoniously dumps the pages into the garbage can. "Speechwriters we hired couldn't write a thank-you note without a fucking thesaurus. I'll write the damn thing myself."

"A field general is only as good as his EO, sir."

Hall nods in agreement, his impression of this army veteran from West Virginia only getting better by the minute. With four grown sons, he has always lamented having no daughters. In the car later that evening, after a long day, Hall will recall these few minutes with Hayley and consider fixing up his youngest son with her. After Hall's wife, Carol, died from cancer three years ago, Paul has been the most attentive in helping his dad through the dark, lonely times. Next time his youngest is down from New York, Hall makes a mental note to invite the new intern over to the house on Kalorama Road for brunch.

"No one expected him to go all the way. No one even saw Richard Monroe coming. Ninety-nine percent of Washington figured him for just another war hero with a book deal at Simon and Schuster," Hall informs her. "I saw a chance for national redemption."

"It was a good book, sir. Read it twice," she relates.

“And its author actually wrote it! Words like hand grenades and napalm for ideas. How else to win a political war for the ages? Obliterate the status quo and take no prisoners.”

“Yes, sir, but as Bismarck said, politics is the art of the possible.”

Hall scoffs. “The art of the next best? Nice try, Ms. Chill, and kudos for being better read than all of your Ivy League colleagues combined. But don’t underestimate the forces mobilized against us.” He pauses for dramatic effect, hinging at the waist as he leans his face toward hers. “They want us dead!”

“Sir . . . ?” Hayley protests.

Hall cuts her off with an index figure pointed to the ceiling. “The president or me. Dead! And don’t be surprised when it happens. They’ll do anything to stop us. Trust no one.”

“Who is ‘they,’ sir?”

“The people who actually control this town, the shadow government, or ‘deep state.’ Call it what you will, they are a hybrid association of elements of government joined with parts of top-level finance and industry that effectively governs the United States, and without consent of the electorate. They’re afraid of what Richard Monroe might do to the precious power they’ve accrued over decades of entrenchment. These elements are mortally afraid of an end to a status quo of their creation and will preserve what they believe is rightfully theirs through any means necessary.”

Hayley remains quiet, Hall’s words hanging in the air.

“We, as a country, think we’re so different, that we’re better than all of that. But we’re not better. We’re not all that different from anyone else. This country was founded in blood. Blood is our heritage, just like every other country on the planet.” The chief of staff gives Hayley a sidelong look, a wry grin on his face. “But I’m not telling you anything, am I, Ms. Chill? You’ve seen something of the real world, unlike your fellow interns.”

Hayley's face remains impassive. "Yes, sir."

Hall nods, satisfied with this meeting of like minds, however disparate their professional positions. He casually gestures toward the door, as if the dire threat he had just mentioned was simply part of the job. "Don't have much time to bang this out. Appreciate your time."

"That's all, sir?"

"For now." Hall seems to consider saying more but decides against it.

Hayley dutifully rises to her feet and strides toward the door.

"Keep close, Ms. Chill, and stay alert. Your country needs you," he calls after her.

"Thank you, sir." Hayley quietly leaves the room.

---