



MADAM PRESIDENT

Ray Foy

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* * *

I sold my soul to the Devil. I know it now. At the time I thought I was just getting the endorsement of a very powerful man. He was bizarre, but then, the head of an international banking cartel can afford to be. Especially when he has the power to decide an American presidential election. Awe of that power made me devalue my immortal soul. You see, I believed Eleazar Santos could make me the first woman President of the United States.

I was skeptical at first. I had only learned of the existence of Santos and his firm, Montagu and Kuhn, a few days before I was to meet with him at his corporate headquarters in Dubai. Sure, I was aware of the powerful groups that had to be appeased to make it in national politics.

When campaigning for junior senator from Massachusetts, I quickly learned which butts to kiss for contributions and endorsements. And in the twenty years since, I've made my appearances before those international associations that provide me a global profile.

So when the Party gave me the presidential nod, I wasn't surprised to have to interview with the Trilateral Commission and the Council on Foreign Relations. Then I took those approvals to the Bilderberger Group, the elite of elites whose backing would clinch my nomination. And so they did. But after a triumphal convention, I learned of this final endorsement, the one I would need to win the election.

The balloons and confetti had barely settled when William Dowd, my campaign manager, suggested I take a few days rest. Rest. I was charged and ready to campaign. I needed to ride my wave of momentum, not rest. Then Bill cut through my high with the truth. He's good at that. That's why he became my Chief-of-Staff.

"I'm talking about more than a few days off, Candy," he said. "There's a very important meeting you need to attend in Dubai. All presidential candidates do it."

That's when Bill told me about Santos. He said if my meeting with him went well, it would assure me the presidency.

I couldn't believe a single endorsement was so important, especially one from a foreigner. Still I wondered at Bill's conviction. He was adamant that I meet with Santos before any more campaigning. The arrangements were made, and nominations could be undone.

I didn't miss the threat. I knew nominations could be undone. Just not mine. I didn't want this to be my first.

So the next evening, I found myself on a private jet flying into the Dubai emirate of the United Arab Emirates. My meeting with Santos was scheduled for the following morning at the corporate offices of Montagu and Kuhn, in the Burj Khalifa.

I remember my husband, Dennis, gawking at the wondrous architecture below us as we flew in--like an enthralled ten-year-old seeing Disney World for the first time. He spotted the palm-shaped, artificial island right off and let everyone know it could be seen from space. He was amazed at the huge, connected lakes in the middle of all the tall buildings and wondered if people sailed on them. I recognized the "lakes" from my reading as the dredged-out Dubai Creek and started to tell him so, but he cut me off to point out a building that looked like a sailboat.

"That's the al-Arab," I said. "It's the tallest hotel in the world."

"We staying there, baby?"

"No." I looked over him out the window. I didn't think our lodgings would be too tough to spot. They weren't. "See that really tall building? The one that looks like a bunch of cylinders tied together with a needle on top?"

"Yeah," Dennis said. "It's twice as tall as anything around it. That's where we're staying?"

"That's it. The Burj Khalifa. It's the tallest building in the world. At least until some of the others down there are finished. My meeting's on the top floor."

"Wow," Dennis said. He pressed his nose flat against the window like he was trying to see something directly below.

"Where's Dubailand?" he said. "I hear it's bigger than Disney World."

That did it for me.

"I don't think it's finished yet." I said, and moved to a seat across the aisle. "Alan, bring me another drink."

"Better wait until we land, Senator," said Alan Keeler, the head of my private security detail. He took the cue to tell our whole party to strap in for the landing. The party consisted of Dennis

and me, and Alan with his two associate guards. My meeting with Santos was to be very private, only a few having the need-to-know. The rest of the world thought I was taking a post-convention break in Belize.

Our suite was on the thirty-ninth floor of the Khalifa and was part of the Armani hotel that occupied most of the floors from there to the ground. It was easily the most luxurious I had ever stayed in. The decor lived up to its designer name and was accented with Middle Eastern antiques that I was afraid to touch. And I can only describe the view of the Persian Gulf from that height as breath-taking.

But we had little time to appreciate the accommodations or the view. We barely had time to unpack and change into our evening formals before King Maktoum's emissaries arrived to take us to dinner. They were the usual sort of rich officials, relatives, and hangers-on that orbit the centers of power. I've learned to deal politely with such and navigate them to the real authorities. These were Arab-looking, but dressed in Western clothes. That's not unusual for wealthy Middle-Easterners but I was expecting a little more tradition. I took it as their way of putting me at ease.

Dinner was impressive. I've been entertained by royalty before, but the King of Dubai really knows how to party. I had thought that Muslim entertaining would be pretty austere, but this was as extravagant as anything in Dubai. We ate in a reserved chamber of the Atmosphere restaurant on the 122nd floor. The King was there with more of the Dubai elite and a few Europeans. Some I knew and greeted. Others I knew to respect their anonymity. After a welcoming from the King, we all settled into a feast of global proportions.

There were a lot of fruit and nut dishes, and the traditional shawarma that I always enjoy in that part of the world. The kitchen provided most anything, and Dennis even asked for a hamburger. There was a very un-Muslim flow of wine as well, though I didn't notice the King or any of his entourage partaking. The Europeans certainly did, so I felt it was OK. No one objected, anyway.

After dinner, there was more wine and power-talk, with the King going on about the glory of Dubai as he and most of the others smoked their hookahs. I was offered a tube and took a pull to be polite. I felt a narcotic rush and handed it back. Even offering a smoke to a woman was a major concession for my hosts. Actually, it was a major concession just having me there and eating with them. There were no other women and I felt a decided tension toward me in the conversation. At the time, I thought it was because of my position and potential office, or maybe just because I was a woman. I think now it was because of the next day's meeting.

Well past midnight, I said my good-nights. The King and company were polite in return, though most were varying degrees of stoned or drunk. Still, I detected relief at my retirement. As if they were glad to finally be relieved of an odious duty.

The one man still alert was my bear of a bodyguard, and I steadied myself on his shoulder.

"Alan, get me to my room, please," I said, drunk with wine and potential power.

"Right, Senator. This way."

"Where's Dennis?"

"He's still here, but wants to find a lounge."

"He'll get lost," I said. But I knew he'd keep trying. If there was enough alcohol in this hotel to enable him to drink to passing out, he'd find it.

"Ruffo's with him," Alan said. "He'll see he gets back to the room."

"Tell him to dump Dennis in the foyer. He can crawl to bed if he's able."

"Yes ma'am."

The forty-mile-an-hour elevator ride spun my wine-soaked head until I almost puked. I held it, though, as I gripped Alan's arm and buried my face in his sleeve. Good man. If I had thrown up on him, he would have just stood there and taken it.

Alan left me at my room with a promise to call in the morning before escorting me to the meeting. I slurred a thank-you and made my way to the bedroom. I set the alarm for six and had just enough strength left to kick off my shoes and pass out on the silk sheets.

If the alarm rang, I didn't hear it, but creeping daylight and a wine hangover roused me to consciousness. There was a dark lump beside me on the bed, and after staring at it a few seconds, I realized it was Dennis, passed out in his clothes.

A soft buzzing gradually registered in my throbbing head. The alarm? I looked at the clock. Eight ten. I slapped at it but the buzzing continued. Oh. The phone. I lifted the receiver.

"Yes?"

"Good morning, Senator." It was Alan. "I believe your meeting is at nine. Shall we meet you at eight forty-five?"

"Oh. Yes. Yes, I'll be ready."

Few women can beat me at getting ready when I'm motivated. By eight-thirty I was showered and dressed in my trademark black pants suit. I considered for a moment whether pants on a woman would offend my host, but then, I was an American presidential nominee. I would dress as I pleased.

I think that was the last time I really felt in control of myself. Or of anything.

A familiar high-low tone sounded as I switched off my hair-dryer. I looked for the satellite phone and found it on the night stand beside the still-snoring Dennis. I carried it to the living room.

"Morning, Candy," Bill Dowd said when I pressed the *Talk* button. "Ready for your big day? The first of the rest of your life?"

"No platitudes, Bill, I'm too hung over. But I guess I'm ready. I'm hungry, though. I thought about calling Santos' office and asking him to wait until I've had breakfast."

"No. Don't you dare," Bill said. I could imagine his fat jowls shaking in panic. "You don't keep this man waiting. You be at his office on time, I don't care if you're about to drop from hunger."

"All right, all right. I didn't mean it. I'll be there. But I still don't understand why it's so important to kiss this guy's ass. I've got the support of the banking elites, even the Bilderburgers. I can't believe he's more influential than them."

"Believe it. Eleazar Santos can veto all your other endorsements if he chooses," Bill said. "His family has ruled Europe from behind the scenes for centuries. He never attends an elite meeting, but his presence is felt at all of them. They do nothing without his OK."

I had heard this before, and still didn't believe it. I went along because Bill and the Party insisted.

"Yeah, but I have the nomination. The election will determine what happens to me next, not this Santos."

"You know better, Candy. Anyway, the Party chairman was telling me last night, if you get Santos' endorsement, he'll see to it that your victory in November is a landslide."

"A landslide?"

"That's right. Think about it. What it would mean for the country. After the last four years, people would feel confident in their President again. Like they were sending you to Washington with a mandate."

Bill knew how to get to me. There was a knock at the door.

"That's my escort. I got to go, Bill."

"Be on time, Candy. Charm the man."

"How?" I said. "You tell me how powerful Santos is, but you haven't said anything about him as a person. Is he married? Does he like women?"

When Bill didn't answer right off, I thought the phone had gone dead.

"He's...unique," Bill said. "If you want to be President...just go along with him."

"Go along?"

"Good luck, Candy. Bye."

The call ended.

I heard the knocks again and opened the door to Alan and his two associates in black suits and sunglasses--the uniform of Speer Securities.

"Good morning, Senator. Ready?"

"Morning, Alan. Lead the way."

I followed my guards down the lush wing of the Armani to the elevator lobby where we waited beneath a portrait of Saladin. When the elevator arrived, Alan and his men made sure we were the only riders and punched the button for the 154th floor.

The ride that had made me sick last night, just made me grab the rails today. I guess it was a good thing the elevators were so fast, considering the distances they had to cover. We reached our floor and the doors shooshed open.

A giant filled the opening. He must have been seven feet tall. Dark, like an Arab, with a completely shaven head and face, he was dressed in an Italian suit. If he had had a goatee and robes, he could have been a genie.

"Welcome, Senator Wilke," the man said. "I am Melph. I will take you to Mr. Santos."

"Thank you," I said, and stepped around him off the elevator. Alan and his men meant to follow, but Melph blocked them with his sheer bulk.

"You will not need your guards," Melph said. "I will see you safely to Mr. Santos' office."

"I was told I could use my own security," I said. This was a surprise and I knew Alan wouldn't go along with it.

"You do not need them," Melph repeated, still blocking the Speer men.

"We're responsible for Senator Wilke's safety in Dubai," Alan said, reaching into his jacket while his men did the same. "We won't leave her."

Melph seemed unimpressed. He just stood his ground and stared down my guards. I was amazed to see them remove their hands, empty, from their jackets and move to the back of the elevator. This was not like Speer men. Alan stared hard at Melph.

"I know you," Alan said. His voice was strained, somehow. Like he was fighting for the words. "I saw you in Kosovo and Tora Bora."

"And I know you," Melph said.

The two men's eyes remained locked on each other, as if caught in some strange, invisible bond. Considering the endorsement I needed, I didn't want this to end in violence.

"It's OK, Alan," I said. "Go on back. I'll call you when I'm ready."

Alan didn't protest. He was staring at Melph, even as the elevator doors closed. Then Melph turned and walked past me.

"This way, Senator."

I followed him down the north wing. Paintings that looked very old filled the walls around sand-colored statues, desert plants, and even fish tanks. The exotic ambiance was enhanced by window views of the distant Dubai wilderness, well beyond the city's hubris.

I saw no other people. There was just the two of us, walking past office doors, some of which were opened to offices as elegantly appointed as the connecting hallways.

We reached a door flanked by stained glass. Melph produced a bright red card and waved it over a black box next to the door knob. When the box turned red, he pressed it with his thumb and the door slid open. I followed him inside.

We were in an outer office or reception area with leather couches and chairs within dark, cherry walls. Water bubbled down a stone edifice that looked as if it had come from some ruined temple. Stele, helmets, and swords of ancient vintage decorated the room.

"Please have a seat, Senator."

"Thank you," I said and sat in a thick, cushioned chair as Melph disappeared through a door that apparently led to Santos' office.

My stomach rumbled as I waited and I looked around for snacks, but found none. Then Melph returned.

"Mr. Santos will see you now," he announced and left the room through the hallway door. I looked to the office, expecting Santos to emerge, but he didn't. After long seconds, I walked to the office door. I hesitated, wondering if I was supposed to go in. Then a man's voice, deep, yet smooth as satin, spoke from inside.

"Please come in, Senator Wilke."

I entered a large, lavishly furnished room dominated by a wall of windows revealing the panorama of Dubai. The antiquities theme continued. Armor and weapons decorated the walls. Fierce stone gods scowled from the corners. I crossed a Persian carpet to a huge wooden desk where a smiling man sat holding a golden dagger with lapis lazuli handle. He laid the dagger on the desk and stood, bowing slightly.

"Senator Wilke. What a pleasure to finally meet you. I am Eleazar Santos."

He wasn't what I expected. I thought I'd find a wrinkled octogenarian like so many of the old-money elites. Santos looked middle-aged, distinguished, tall, with black hair, gray along the edges and with an all-white goatee. His skin was dark, like Melph's, giving him an Arab look, but his eyes were a startling green, like uncut emeralds.

On reflex, I offered him my hand, which he gave a slight squeeze. His smile softened what would otherwise have been an arrogant gesture. He motioned me to a seat beside a low, intricately carved table and took a seat there himself. Moving from behind a desk is usually meant to put a subordinate at ease. The implication was not lost on me.

"So, Senator," he said. "You want to be the first woman American President."

I usually like meetings that come right to the point, but I heard condescension in his tone and was immediately put off. Also, I was tired, hungry, and a little hung-over. I didn't see the point of this meeting, anyway, so I wasn't going to defer to him.

"I am my Party's nominee," I said, "and I would appreciate your support. Many of your associates in world finance are supporting me."

"I'm aware of who is supporting you," he said. He pressed the tips of his fingers together and stared at me through them. "They are why you are your Party's nominee. Today we will determine whether you will become President."

"I don't know what we'll determine today," I said. "The November election in America will determine if I become President."

My stomach growled. I sucked it in to quell it. Damn! I should have eaten something.

"You've been a faithful Party member," he said, "and become a force in US politics. Now that you aspire to a global role you must convince the world powers that you can carry out our agenda better than your opponent."

"Your agenda?" This was unbelievable arrogance. Even by Washington standards. "Look, I understand making concessions for campaign contributions and strategic support, but once I'm in office, I'll govern by my own agenda."

He rested his hands on the chair arms and continued his unblinking stare, not missing a beat.

"You will continue to prosecute the wars, they're necessary to maintain alliances and keep the oil flowing properly. They're also profitable for your contributors. Then the dollar must be destroyed and I think this next administration will be the time to do it. It will facilitate the creation of the North American Union and a solid western financial sphere. Then there will be at least two more pandemics to oversee--"

"Wait," I nearly shouted. "What are you talking about? Who do you think you are?"

My stomach let loose another growl.

Santos rose and crossed the room to a wet bar from which he retrieved a plate of small, brown breads. He placed them on the table along with what appeared to be wine in a clay bowl.

"One shouldn't discuss business on an empty stomach. These are local delicacies."

I went along with the break in tension and picked up one of the breads. I needed something on my stomach, anyway. It felt hard. I bit into it and found it was hard as stone.

"Soak it in the wine," Santos said.

I did and tried again. This time I was able to eat it. It was surprisingly sweet. I ate the whole thing and took another.

As I ate, Santos turned his chair toward the windows.

"Fantastic, isn't it?" he said, indicating the view. "This is literally the highest corporate office in the world."

"Yes, Dubai is an amazing place," I said around a mouthful of bread. There was no other drink, so I washed it down with the wine. It was bitter on my stomach.

"So many men died building this tower. Mostly Asians. How many is a state secret." He smiled that smile again. "But it was a lot. Can you imagine falling from these heights?"

"I've seen the mighty fall from great heights," I said.

Santos chuckled.

"I have as well. Very many. But you yourself have yet to ascend to the heights of power, Senator. Real power. That's what's on offer to you, if you simply agree to work with me as your presidents have been doing since nineteen thirteen."

"Funny, you don't look that old," I said.

"My family tree has deep roots."

I had had enough. Maybe this guy was rich and powerful, but he was also crazy.

"All right. Look, Mr. Santos, I appreciate your interest in American politics and would like your support--"

"Let me show you something, Senator." Santos rose and went to a partition at one end of the room. He beckoned to me to join him. Beyond the partition was a desk surrounded by shelving that contained dozens of monitors, like some kind of control center.

Many were filled with what looked like television news feeds from around the world. I recognized a few capitals--London, Paris, Beijing. Some looked like security cameras trained on gatherings of governmental bodies. Britain's Parliament was pretty obvious. There were stock

exchanges and apparent private offices. I spotted the Oval Office in the midst of it all. It looked like the President was holding a cabinet meeting. How could that be?

Some of the monitors contained data. Financial data it seemed, some apparently for individuals. I sat in a thickly padded executive's chair and stared in wonder at the images surrounding me.

"What is this?" I asked.

"It is as it appears," he said. "The power centers of the world, known and unknown, and the information that drives them all. You can have a place in it. You can be a power yourself. Just work with me."

I should have run out right then, but the images and data were fascinating.

"You seem to have access to places and information. Technology, obviously," I said, "but determining the outcome of an American presidential election--"

"Is as easy as destroying a person," he said. "Have you checked your financial accounts lately?"

"Yesterday," I said, wary. "Why?"

He didn't reply but leaned over a laptop computer on the desk and punched at it for a minute. Then he turned it toward me and I saw the screen contained the logon to my Swiss bank account, the encrypted connection in place.

"Go ahead," he said.

I logged in. Everything looked normal until I checked balances.

They were all zero.

"This is a trick."

He handed me a satellite phone.

"Call whomever you wish and check."

I called Bill Dowd. He had the account numbers and the contacts to determine if this was for real. And I trusted him.

"Bill," I said when he answered the phone. "Listen carefully. I want you to check the balances on all my personal financial accounts. Let me know what they are."

"What?" Bill said. "Your personal accounts? What's going on? Have you met with Santos, yet?"

"I'm still in my meeting. Please do this, Bill. Now. All of my accounts." I paused and choked back tears. "Call people. Get verifications from your contacts. Note this sat phone number and call me back. Do it."

"OK, OK," he said. "I got your number, I'll get back to you."

While I waited, I checked Dennis' accounts. Even he didn't know I could get to them so I thought it would be a good test.

They had zero balances, too.

Santos sat sipping a bowl of wine while I waited for Bill's call. He said nothing. I could only ponder the enormity of what was happening. I don't think I've ever felt so lost.

Not sure of what else to do, I helped myself to some more stone bread and perused my accounts on the laptop. Finally, the sat phone chimed.

"Candy," Bill said. "It's true. I don't know how, but your Swiss accounts and your American accounts--even your Trinidad accounts--they've been wiped out. There's nothing. I've got agents checking now. It's got to be a computer glitch."

"Thank you, Bill. I'll talk to you later."

I ended the call. Santos was smiling again.

"You see. Your life is in my hands, anyway. Why lose it all when there's so much to gain. You have the support of the world's elites and they all answer to me. Think of all the good you can do as President of the United States. And your fame as the first woman in that office can propel you to the first presidency of the North American Union, where you'll truly be an elite."

It was tempting. And frightening. I was beginning to believe him, but I wasn't sure if I was being propositioned or blackmailed. Still, power would be assured and I could do a lot of good, though it was certain I'd have to do a lot of bad, too. But that would be no different from the last twenty years in Congress.

"My accounts?"

"Restored," he said.

I checked the laptop. All was normal. I was rich again.

"So, isn't there some kind of contract to sign?" I asked.

"I can always produce contracts," he said. "Signed and everything. No, our agreement must be sealed in another way."

With the high and mighty, that always meant sex. I had been there before. It was nothing.

"A little ceremony," he said and walked back to the huge desk. He returned with the golden dagger and withdrew the blade from its sheath.

I pressed my back as deeply as I could into my chair cushions. Surely, he didn't go through all that just to slit my throat?

The golden blade gleamed in the sunlight reflected through the windows from the mighty Persian Gulf, as Santos slid the edge over his open hand. Blood pooled in his palm as he extended it towards me.

"Drink."

THE END

Ray Foy lives in Ridgeland, Mississippi where he writes short stories with a paranormal streak. His ghost story, *Supernal*, appeared in volume 3 issue 5 of Residential Aliens (<http://www.resaliens.com/2009/11/supernal/#more-412>). His story, *Davis and the Goth*, will appear in the Residential Aliens 2010 printed anthology, *While the Morning Stars Sing* (<http://www.resaliens.com/a-call-for-submissions/>).

Check out his other work in Smashwords at: <https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/RayFoy>