

The first woman elected president of the U.S. must find a way to stop a Russian killer from exposing her dark secret, a secret that will put both the safety of her lover and her presidency in jeopardy days before her inauguration.

The Truth is Always Negotiable

By Ernie Dorling

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ERNIE DORLING

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Chapter 1

Six weeks after the presidential election

“It’s getting late,” the man said.

“Yeah, almost midnight,” the other man replied, as he glanced at his watch for the third time in as many minutes. Time passed slowly when he had to wait. Waiting was always the most challenging part. The cold winter air sliced through his lungs and sent a chill through his body as he stood outside waiting for the right moment to enter the house. It would not be long, he told himself. Patience. After all, it is one of the traits of his profession. *Take a deep breath and relax*, he thought to himself. He had been taught never to let personal feelings get in the way. There was too much at risk.

A few lights remained on inside the house. He knew that some would stay on throughout the night, especially the hundreds of white ones decorating the outside that signaled the approach of the holiday season. That would not be a problem. Neither would the two men inside. In another hour they would be tired, and their senses diminished. He knew that too. It did not matter that they were part of a rotating shift and that they had slept earlier that afternoon. The mind and body were not designed for being up all night one week, and then working a different shift the following one. It wreaked havoc on the body’s internal system, especially on one’s circadian rhythm, the internal body clock that is keyed to daylight and darkness. He also knew that shift work often led to depression, high blood pressure, and of course, trouble staying asleep. After several weeks, the constant changing of shift work left you mentally tired and physically exhausted, especially without a day off. He too was tired and needed rest. But not tonight. He was as committed as he was cautious. And while he tried to keep fit, he did not have the energy to continue doing what he was hired and paid to do so many years ago. Every morning while shaving he would notice the ever-increasing gray in his thick brown hair. That and the wrinkles under his eyes painfully reminded

him he was aging. The stresses of his profession only contributed to speeding up that process.

This was one of the times her husband had been away while she remained home, safe inside the fenced fortress they called the mansion. Both were often gone for weeks, sometimes together, but more often apart. In a few days, they would both be gone. He knew this would be his last opportunity. In a way, he welcomed it. This would be the last time, he told himself as he tried to keep warm. The risks were becoming too great. He had gone on undetected far too long. Everyone's luck runs out at some point, he reminded himself. This would have to be the last time.

He glanced at his watch again. It was almost one a.m. He wouldn't have much time. He would have to get in and out in just under an hour. After that? He didn't want to think about it. *Should I go in at one or wait until two a.m.* he thought. He convinced himself that waiting the extra hour would be better. The two men inside would be tired and maybe even doze off. Not both. But maybe one. In another hour, they would be less attentive. They were trained to react swiftly when necessary. But that's not what they would do tonight. Patience, he told himself.

It was one minute after two in the morning when he heard the last man on the security detail signal over the secure radio net that everything was in order. It was then that Michael Dionis quietly entered the house through the rear door. One man, no more than thirty years old, was sitting at the kitchen table reading a sports magazine. Something he read caused him to groan. The smell of old coffee permeated the air. He could see the young agent sipping coffee from a plain white cup. From the color of the coffee, Dionis realized that the man had ruined it by adding cream. *The young ones always do that*, he thought.

The man's coat jacket was hung neatly on the back of a kitchen chair revealing the government issued semi-automatic, Glock 19 pistol hanging from his shoulder holster. The young ones liked the shoulder holster. It made them feel like real detectives. But they weren't. They

were hired to be guards. And the better one looked in a suit, the better their chances of being hired.

Dionis could see that he was just a kid. Jet black hair. Tall, good looking, just the kind of kid the agency was looking for these days. It didn't matter if they would ever become good investigators; that was secondary at best. Look good, stay alert, and keep your mouth shut, and you would do well in the service.

Dionis wondered where the other man was. In the bathroom perhaps? Maybe napping on the couch as many of them often did on the midnight shift. That would be good, he told himself, as he crept quietly behind the man whose attention was on whatever it was, he was reading. It was always a game with him to see how close he could get to someone before being detected. Sometimes he would quietly walk right on past them, no-one ever knowing he had been there until it was too late. Dionis turned and faced the young agent sitting at the kitchen table, brought his hand up to his mouth, placed his finger next to his lips and whispered, "Brian. Where's Brian?"

The young agent simply pointed to a room adjacent to the kitchen. Curious, the young agent got up and quietly followed Dionis into the next room, making sure to keep enough distance to not disrupt whatever it was Dionis had planned on doing. But the man sitting at the desk in the next room was more alert than the young agent in the kitchen had been. He turned while Dionis was still a few feet away, and said, "Hi boss. Cold outside?"

"Damn cold, Brian," Dionis said. "I'll be glad to see this detail move to D.C. so I can get back to my office."

"Not many bosses work the night shift," the young man said. "Can I get you some coffee?"

"Absolutely," Dionis answered. "Just black, the way you're supposed to drink it." The comment was, of course, lost on the kid.

The two men walked into the kitchen where the young agent poured both Dionis and Brian Olsen a cup of coffee, not suspecting anything more than this being a routine visit by the senior man on the

shift. Agents from the local office were always assisting the permanent protection detail of a candidate when the protectee was home or traveling through their area. But most bosses who had to supply agents supplementing the regular security team made sure they caught the day shift. Dionis was quick to put himself on the night tour. It was the shift with the least number of people to deal with. The number of agents providing protection would be reduced and the media would be asleep or someplace writing their stories. The late shift was the only shift he could work if he were to be successful. Getting out without being detected was still going to be a problem. But he was going to take the risk; just this one last time.

Olsen was one of Dionis' senior agents assigned to his office in New Haven, Connecticut. They had been friends for over a dozen years since they first met during the Obama campaign in 08. It would help to have a friend nearby if something went wrong. Olsen might even help give him the few added moments he would need to get out of the house undetected, if necessary. At a minimum, Dionis thought he'd be able to concoct some believable story to momentarily divert attention from what he was doing long enough to confuse everyone involved. Olsen would cover for him long enough to talk to him privately. Dionis was still convinced that wouldn't be necessary.

“So, how's it going?” Dionis asked. “And don't bullshit me.”

“Not bad. Can't imagine why you and I couldn't have gotten a better detail than this,” Olsen said half laughing.

“What are you complaining about?” Dionis asked. “No big bosses, no press. You just sit here on your ass, read and drink coffee. Besides, I'm the one making the rounds and hanging out in the cold.”

“I'm getting too old for this midnight shit,” Olsen told Dionis. “Besides, man, you're a boss. You could have cut yourself a better deal than this. This stuff is for the young guys.”

“Just because we can retire in a couple of years, doesn't make us old,” Dionis said, as he sipped his coffee. “Anyway, I've got to use the head. Then I'm going to take a walk-through. I'll let myself out the

other end in a bit. You mind sending the rookie outside for an hour or so? Let me warm up in here?”

Olsen knew the phrase “walk-through” meant “catch a short nap.”

“Of course.”

“Thanks. Let’s not corrupt him just yet. Let the service get a few good years out of him before he figures out just how screwed up the system is and gets disillusioned like the rest of us poor bastards.”

“Sure, whatever you say boss,” Brian said, not trying to hide the smirk on his face.

Dionis walked into the hallway leading from the large staff kitchen into the bathroom down the hall. He waited a few moments then quietly made his way through the dimly lit formal dining room and then to the staircase leading to the upstairs living quarters. Knowing which room she was in made his travel instinctual. He also knew that no one else was in the house. None of the staff had remained. It was just her upstairs, alone in the bedroom.

Dionis reached down and quietly turned the doorknob. She had left the door unlocked as she had said she would. That was considerate, he told himself. The room was dark. The shades were drawn preventing even the hint of light from shining through. No nightlights. The only illumination came from the digital clock radio on the nightstand. But it was enough. Dionis had been there twice before. The bedroom was large but spartanly furnished. Ann Banks kept things simple. And no matter the night chill, she opened the window just a crack. She knew he liked it that way.

Dionis waited a moment, allowing his eyes to adjust to the darkness so he could see. It was something he had learned in the Marine Corps years ago. His life had depended on it on more than one occasion. It might just depend on it again.

Dionis walked quietly toward the bed. He could hear her breathing as she slept unaware of his presence. He wondered if he could go through with it. Maybe he should just turn and leave the room. Just

walk away. But he knew he couldn't. Instead, he stood next to the bed and gazed at her for just a moment before placing his hand on her head.

"Michael; I didn't think you'd make it," she said as she sat up in the bed. "How much time do you have?"

"Not much. Less than an hour," he replied. "Brian thinks I'm taking a short nap downstairs. He'll stay in the kitchen while the kid is outside for an hour or so."

"Then we shouldn't waste time," she told him, as she ran the palm of her hand across his cheek. "I've missed you. I don't know how we're going to keep seeing each other once I move to Washington. But I'm going to expect you to find a way."

Dionis said nothing. Instead, he answered her with his eyes as he stroked her neck.

Dionis knew that continuing the relationship was hopeless. He couldn't tell her this was the last time they could be together. She just didn't understand how protective security worked. There were few opportunities for them to be together during the campaign, and especially after she won the election. But once she took office and moved into the White House, it would make such meetings virtually impossible. The risks were too great, especially after the media frenzy during the Clinton administration and the Lewinsky affair. The press would ruin everyone involved, especially her, an independent candidate that beat the odds by winning the presidency. This was going to be the last time. Dionis knew it and, in time, so would she. Besides, being the governor of a small New England State like Connecticut was one thing. Being the president of the United States was another. He kept reminding himself, this had to be the last time.

"Please don't lie to me," she whispered. "You know this isn't going to be easy."

Hoping to avoid that conversation, he said, in a soft voice, "Can we discuss this later?"

"Of course. I've missed you Michael," Banks told him again. "Please come to bed with me."

“Hush,” he said, as he placed his finger over his lips.

Momentarily forgetting the career ending risk he was taking, Dionis quietly undressed, dropping his clothes on the floor. He was careful not to make any noise. He placed his small hand-held radio on the nightstand so that he could hear if anyone tried to contact him. He then slipped into bed with her. Even in the darkness, he could see through the sheer nightgown she was wearing. He gripped her shoulders and pushed her back down on the bed; their gazes met, and his lips found hers in an instant. She leaned into him and felt his arms wrap around her.

Ann Banks had the body of a woman half her age. And she knew it, using her smile, appearance, and spirited personality to win the hearts and minds of many voters. Now, she simply lay down in the bed stroking Dionis’ hair. Their love making had to be quiet. Not like the times when they first met when she was a federal prosecutor. It started innocently enough, the two of them working together long hours preparing for a trial. It wasn’t just animal lust. They started to have feelings for each other. But Dionis was married at the time. He had had affairs before, but Banks was different. They became friends. And they remained friends after she married Patrick. They quietly resumed their affair when she learned that her husband enjoyed the company of a number of other women, as well as his political career, far more than he enjoyed being with her.

As Banks’ popularity grew, she was persuaded by the state’s independent party to run for governor. When she won, it shocked the Democratic and Republican political machines who gave her little chance of success. The politicians in Connecticut hadn’t had the time to prove to her just how the game was played. They hadn’t had time to groom her to their way of thinking and, in the process, make her indebted to them. She was a newcomer, and not simply political window dressing. They knew she was smart, but they never expected her to become governor, at least not just yet. Nor did they think she was up to the job. She was proving them all wrong in that she was truly an independent political operative; the first one the state of

Connecticut had experienced since Lowell Weicker was elected the state's governor in 1991.

The time went by quickly. For a brief moment, Ann felt a sense of timelessness and peace. She wanted nothing more at this moment but to lay there and feel the warmth of his body and his heartbeat against her chest. But time was fading. Dionis dressed and sat on the edge of the bed. For the first time that night, Dionis' fears of being caught did not dominate his mind. His eyes rested on her forehead wishing he could stay and watch her sleep.

Banks' eyes met his. The two lovers didn't speak; they simply stared at each other. Ann Banks wanted nothing more than to be with him and wished the night would not end. She was the first to break the silence. "What are you thinking about? Is there something you want to tell me, Michael?" she whispered, sensing his thoughts were somewhere else.

For a moment Dionis didn't answer. He knew there was no possibility that the two of them had any type of future together. In fact, he had come to realize there was virtually no chance at all of them being together. But he wasn't ready to tell her that, not now; not tonight. He said, "I'll get word to you somehow. You know how to call me. But you'll have to be careful. All the calls from the White House are logged. The more you come back to your home in Connecticut, the better chance I'll have of seeing you." Dionis knew that was a lie. Everybody lies. And he was no different, at least not at that moment. He couldn't tell her the truth. He couldn't tell her that he wouldn't take this chance again. He couldn't leave her with that thought. *What was one more lie?* You can negotiate the truth with wives, lovers, bosses, friends, enemies, defendants, prosecutors and even witnesses. Lies can be manipulated. Lies become truths when it serves one's purpose.

"In the meantime," Dionis continued, "keep using the email account we set up. Remember to never send the message; simply keep the message in the draft folder. We can communicate through that until we see what happens. You're going to be the President of the United

States, Ann. You don't need me to tell you that this is the last thing you want the media finding out."

Banks started to speak. There was a tear in her eye. That was the first time he had ever seen her cry. It had always been friends enjoying each other. He hadn't seen her exhibit this kind of emotion before. Dionis wondered if she had stronger feelings for him than he had thought. Or was she just scared about her new role in life? He quickly dismissed the latter thought; Ann Banks wasn't afraid of much of anything. She was self-assured, determined, and ambitious.

"Michael," she said.

Dionis put his finger to her lips. "Don't talk." He could hear the stress in her voice. "I don't have much time. I have to get back downstairs before the team discovers I'm not napping in the den."

Banks knew she would not have him for very long. He was right; the time for talking was over, at least for now. She wanted to tell him to come with her to Washington. She even envisioned him marrying her. But she kept those feelings to herself. *Another time.*

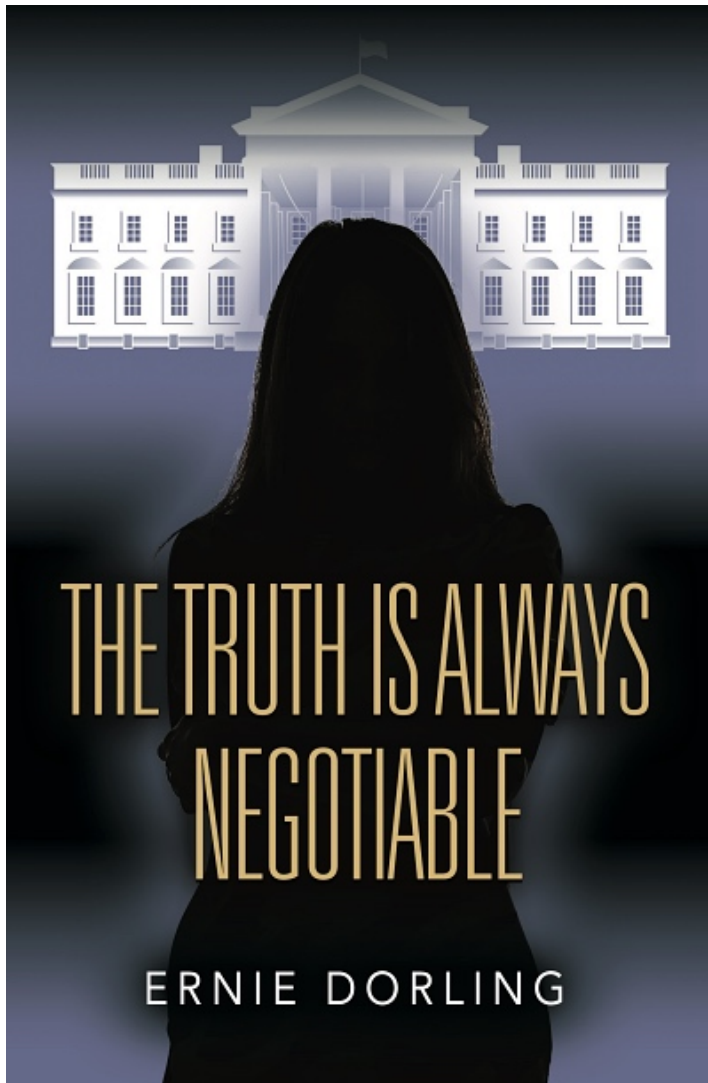
Dionis finished dressing, clipped his gun holster to his belt on his right side and his radio on his left hip. He bent over the bed and kissed her on the lips.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I love you too," he replied. But Ann Banks sensed it was a conditioned response. Something was bothering him, and she couldn't put her finger on it. Their lovemaking had not been as adventurous as it was prior to the election. It had been more programmed, almost as if they had been married for years and had lost the art of spontaneity and innovation. Dionis opened the bedroom door and quietly walked down the stairs and out the front door. He had one minute to spare before the three-a.m. security check. The cold air did not bother him now. His shift would end in about four hours. He would go home to an empty condo and try to sleep. Thinking of Ann had kept him awake too many nights. *I can't do this anymore. She is going to be the President,* he told himself. They were good friends and he loved her. But he knew

he wasn't in love with her. He was painfully aware of the difference between the two feelings. And it would not be long before her every waking moment would be controlled by people she hardly knew. She would not have time to miss him.

A few miles away, Oleg Lomakina listened as the two lovers ended their quiet lovemaking and said good-bye. He turned off the recorder of their conversation. He had been entrusted with the recording device and had successfully had it placed in Ann Banks' bedroom, with the assistance of a maid at the governor's mansion; a maid whose husband's life depended on her ability to do as she was instructed. He would give the recording to Andre Dunayev, convinced he would be pleased. The recordings over the past several days had not produced anything of value as far as Lomakina was concerned. Congressman Patrick Banks rarely shared a bedroom with his wife. But her sharing a bedroom with a Secret Service Agent was more than he could have ever expected. Lomakina was looking forward to watching Dunayev blackmail the new American president and her Secret Service lover into working for their organization. He wondered what Dunayev would do if either of them refused. *Would he reveal the affair, or would he send the incoming president a message by simply killing her lover?* It made no difference to Lomakina. For now, he just wanted another drink; maybe two.



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