

*Less than two months until the 2024 elections, the two presidential candidates are murdered. How was the act committed, and who was responsible? It's the greatest mystery the country has ever known.*

## **The AI Candidates**

By John S. Kirk and Christopher B. Emery

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The

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# Chapter 1

Monday, September 9, 2024  
McLean, Virginia  
Arlington, Virginia  
57 Days Until Election

As the sun began to slip below the horizon, a warm, golden glow cast itself over the sprawling estate. The billionaire reclined in his comfortable chair on the patio of his newly acquired mansion; he enjoyed a long sip of his crafted cocktail, momentarily losing interest in his company's daily financial reports displayed on his laptop. From his vantage point, he gazed out over the manicured lawn and shimmering swimming pool, the tranquility of the scene a stark contrast to the bustling heart of his empire. He imagined the soft clink of ice cubes in crystal glasses echoing from neighboring mansions, where fellow titans of industry talked among themselves in hushed tones about the day's triumphs and trials.

Anyone meeting Eli Morse for the first time would say he had all the gifts: tall, lean, athletically graceful, and cultured in all respects, especially regarding anything related to technology and art. His appearance deeply hid what many considered to be an authoritative personality. The road to his success was littered with metaphorical bodies. He had walked over quite a few of them along the way. There was no one he could

personally name as a friend. No, there was only one purpose to relationships: advancing Eli or his cause.

Lost in thought, he returned to his youth when his parents brought him to this country from South Africa and placed him in an American elementary school. The memory jolted Eli as he remembered the bullies and other kids who were hostile because of his appearance and accent. *I overcame*, thought Eli. *I overcame every obstacle and finally got a PhD in computer science from Stanford, all on scholarships.* None of those once-terrifying bullies were leading successful lives, at least by Eli's measuring cup.

As Eli sat on his great patio, squinting against the setting sun, he imagined the home and its daily activities when it belonged to a charismatic, energetic young senator from Massachusetts. The young senator wrote *Profiles in Courage* while living in the house built just after the American Civil War. Eli wondered whether the young John F. Kennedy had been aided by the history of the house that he owned and entertained in. Eli also wondered whether the Union victory and the end of slavery, and that era's suffering had ruminated through the house and onto the pages of that developing manuscript. The house was so magnificent that Eli wondered why JFK sold it to his younger brother, Robert F. Kennedy. Of course, Bobby needed the space since he and his wife, Ethel, would have a large and active family. Still, the house was too good to sell, even if one's younger brother needed more room.

*Oh, well, thought Eli, the house is mine now. Still, I can't stop wondering about all the world leaders and visionaries who met here to exchange ideas and develop strategies, especially during the turbulent 1960s. The house will see those days once again, Eli told himself. It will be the center for what is currently going on in the free world. Decisions will be made, and policies affecting millions will be enacted.*

And it would all be based on the furtherance of artificial intelligence, his latest coveted technology.

Eli Morse swept a hand over his short black hair; now patched with gray, it reflected his fifty-two years. His daily uniform was all black: black shoes, slacks, and shirt. Whenever he wore a suit, it was a \$5,000 black Tom Ford made in Switzerland. Morse had kept himself in shape by playing water polo, though the demands of his business kept him from participating as much as he would have liked. He still found time to play in drop-in leagues in significant cities when he traveled.

A former casual California liberal, in more recent years, he had developed a more substantial interest in politics and moved from the left to a more central—even slightly conservative—political stance, moving his party affiliation to the Republicans. In addition to politics, Morse had donated over \$40 million to Valley College in Iowa to develop an artificial intelligence lab and build a new mathematics building in the name of his late brother Martin: the Martin Morse Mathematics Building and the

Morse Artificial Intelligence Laboratory (MAIL), a standalone building on campus with a data center in the basement. Eli's funding included enough to hire faculty and a full complement of staff and researchers. Enough money was provided to develop the small college into an AI powerhouse, and continued funding was promised. The AI product, developed and tested at the college, was now marketed by the company as the technology suite Morse Intelligent Systems-E, "E" for engine, indicating the core set of the product.

...

Former U.S. President Victor "Vic" Chandler sat in the office of his comfortable two-story home in the Country Club Hills section of Arlington, Virginia. The white brick house no longer had the expansive yard that set it apart from other homes in the area. No, the Secret Service had seen to that. Extra room for government vehicles and security posts had been carved into the existing yard. What remained was hardly an image of an impeccably maintained yard.

Chandler lit a cigar, poured himself a bourbon, and ruminated over friends and enemies. Eli Morse was undoubtedly a friend, having provided him with substantial contributions through Chandler's political action committee (PAC). President Chandler had been impeached by the U.S. House of Representatives and convicted by the U.S. Senate for accepting bribes while in office. While suspected, it was never proven that some of those bribes came from Eli Morse. Chandler had been

removed from office three years into his term. His former vice president, Claire Mason, pardoned Chandler shortly after his removal once she assumed the presidency.

President Mason's pardon raised more political unrest than Ford's pardon of Nixon many decades ago. So much so that President Mason had decided not to run for president during the next election. Now seventy-two years old, Claire Mason wanted to write a few books and teach a law class at her alma mater, Harvard University. She had appointed longtime friend and colleague Derwood Andrews as vice president. Andrews, a retired law partner in Washington, had only agreed to accept her appointment, pending congressional approval, with the understanding that he would not be on the 2024 ticket should she decide to run, nor would he seek the presidency himself.

This was all fine with Chandler, who believed his pardon allowed him to again seek the presidency, maybe even in 2024, though more likely in 2028. His goal of flipping both houses of Congress to his party while winning the presidency would require the help of many wealthy donors and friends, especially Eli Morse.

Vic Chandler picked up his cell phone and hit the contact entry for Eli. "Eli, it's Vic. I just wanted to touch base with you. How are things?"

"Great, Mr. President. It's always a pleasure to speak with you. What can I do for you, sir?"



“Please, please, just call me Vic when we’re alone. I just wanted to check in with you. I have a few things I’d like to discuss, though I would rather do that in a private, one-on-one setting. Do you still have that big place in Pennsylvania?”

## Chapter 2

Wednesday, September 11, 2024

The Lodge, near Shellsburg, Pennsylvania

54 Days Until Election

The vehicles, like their owners, could not have been more different. The first car to roll up was a two-door Rolls-Royce Wraith, beautifully designed with a red-over-black color scheme, rear-hinged “suicide” doors that welcomed the driver into the utmost of luxury, and a V12 engine producing more than six hundred horsepower: the beauty and the beast.

The Rolls sped up the mountain to Eli Morse’s weekend retreat outside Shellsburg, Pennsylvania. Though he owned houses across the globe, he always gravitated to that one retreat when he wished to get away from things. A gigantic cedar-and-glass A-frame, which sat on three hundred mountain acres, provided solitude and a place for very private meetings. Affectionately, the house had been nicknamed “The Lodge.” It could not be seen from the road but still enjoyed a staff of 24/7 personnel assigned to protect it, along with the latest high-definition infrared cameras, motion detection sensors, and more than a few German shepherds.

Eli coasted the beautiful Rolls-Royce through the entrance gate, which had automatically opened at his approach, and parked in the open bay of the four-car

garage. As he entered the house from the garage, his permanent staff greeted him by describing the status of his requests for the evening. As he entered the great room with its wood beam ceiling, his eye caught a few of the great paintings and sculptures he was so proud of: *Christina's World* by Andrew Wyeth, *The Lunch* by Monet, *The Yellow House* by van Gogh, and porcelain wall sculptures by Maren Kloppmann—a small museum in a lonely house rarely seen by anyone outside of himself and his staff. The living room bar was fully stocked; his first-floor library, located just off the great room, had a fire going despite the warm September evening; and dinner consisted of grilled sea scallops followed by roasted figs and ham, with cherry clafoutis for dessert. A selection of wine was decanting in the formal dining room on the ten-person, hand-crafted table.

The other vehicles were identical Chevy Suburbans, each armored and outfitted with an array of blue and red lights that, when activated, screamed to drivers of other vehicles, “Get out of the way. Now!” The Suburbans were quite a sight on the road, tailgating one another to ensure no one could force themselves between the gigantic vehicles. Residents of the Washington, DC area were used to seeing caravans of SUVs with flashing lights demanding that other drivers move aside, even during crowded, rush-hour traffic. Far outside of DC, the sight of a monster SUV with flashing lights right on one’s bumper, its siren blaring, would have been horrifying to those unfamiliar with the ways of Washington.

The rear seat in the second SUV of the caravan held former President Vic Chandler. The pardon he had received ensured lifetime benefits for Chandler, who showed no qualms when it came to putting his large pension, free office space, and Secret Service protection to good use. The Secret Service credentials offered by the vehicles' occupants were not enough to waive the customary gate-opening procedure or the K-9 group's cursory sweep of both vehicles. The lead driver had to personally notify security of their approach, which let them pass through the two protocols.

After the check, the Suburbans were motioned up the circular driveway, and they stopped at the main, double-door entrance to the magnificent house. Eli approached the second SUV and waited for the former president to exit as an agent held the armored door open. Chandler, a former political star, now disgraced, was a Naval Academy grad, retired Navy pilot, and Harvard Law graduate. Handsome and in his early fifties, he was known for his high intelligence and aggressive personality.

Eli's chief of security, a forty-something man, just over six-feet-five, muscled like a bodybuilder, and dressed in a black uniform—the standard for Morse Intelligent Systems security and facility staff—led the Secret Service into the house to discuss security details and the layout of the house and grounds. After their discussion, the two security details convened on the patio and grilled themselves ribeye steaks. Eli then gave the

former president a house tour while one agent stayed close to Chandler. The tour ended in the mahogany-paneled living room with its sweeping view of the valley below.

“It used to be Maker’s Mark on the rocks, Mr. President,” said Eli.

“Still is,” Chandler reminded him with a nod. “Please remember just to call me Vic when we’re alone.”

Eli walked over to the custom-made Spanish cedar bar and poured them a bourbon.

Chandler, dressed casually in khaki pants, a yellow shirt, and loafers, his straight, blond hair grown out quite a bit since he’d been in office, approached the bar, accepted the drink, and gazed out over the early evening view of the sweeping valley below before settling into an overstuffed leather chair.

Eli sat in a matching chair next to Vic, only an antique end table between them. They could both take in the beautiful view of the tree-lined valley below the house, which drove the pre-dinner conversation and small talk about family and mutual friends.

Chandler turned his eyes from the pleasant view. “I recall meeting your son some years ago. He was quite the promising mathematician if I remember correctly. I think

he was in high school at the time and was out here from California visiting his dad.”

“Yes, that was Elijah. My only child. Three ex-wives, all living very comfortably in California and France. Elijah was with ex-wife number two. Unfortunately, he has been in and out of rehab facilities for the last five years. I’m afraid he can’t shake his drug and alcohol problems. I blame both myself and his mother. She would say I was never there, which was true, but she never made him accountable for anything.” He paused briefly. “Sorry to go off like that. I am worried about him.” Eli shifted in his chair and scratched an itch around his eye. An itch that didn’t exist.

Vic leaned back in his chair. He knew all of Elijah’s problems but brought them up anyway—a ploy to weaken Eli a bit before shifting to the former president’s real purpose for the meeting.

After drinks and the perfectly prepared dinner, they retired to the library—minus the Secret Service, as had been agreed to—where they had brandy and coffee. Eli closed the mahogany door and sat beside the former president in a high-backed chair facing the fire. The coffee and brandy had been placed on a side table.

“Well, Vic, when you asked for this meeting to be as private as possible, I admit it raised many questions....” Eli gently placed his coffee mug, now empty, on the side table. “Such as why would the former president want to

meet with me so privately, and how could I be of any help?"

"It's about our two national candidates. I can't see either one becoming an effective president."

Vic smiled, waiting for Eli to agree. After all, Vic couldn't imagine the man debating something so obvious. The Democratic candidate was New England-bred Wella "Wellborn" Olsen, the wealthy governor of Massachusetts and an heir to a computer empire. A Yale legacy, he graduated with a BA in history and later from Yale's renowned law school. Life was easy for Wella, who probably never worked a whole day in his life. The perfect caricature of a politician and family man. His kids went to the best schools; his wife was a Julliard grad and effortlessly more talented than him. He had no passion for the great people of his state nor for his role as governor or candidate for the highest office in the country. Wella and his life were blasé. That might have been perceived by some to reflect a certain JFK kind of coolness, but with time, it had grown increasingly apparent that Wella was uninspiring and lacked creative energy and leadership.

The Republican candidate was, in Vic's mind, no better. A fourth-term senator from Arizona and formerly a political science professor at Arizona State University, Elaine Lovinggood also came from money. Her mother had been a high-profile attorney, and her father a radiologist. Elaine had gained renown before her initial

run for the U.S. Senate by frequenting news programs as a guest, where her insight was well regarded. The concern of political insiders—and a feeling shared by Vic—was that Elaine was too honest and straightforward. There was no give-and-take with Elaine; she didn't often compromise—a deadly sin in the eyes of the political elite.

Eli sighed. “Vic, the conventions are over, so not much can be done about them. We are stuck with what we have, though I agree with your sentiment.”

“Well, another brandy, and maybe I'll tell you what I really think!” Once the sniffers were refilled, Vic settled back into his chair and went on. “It's time for action. We can't just accept these candidates.”

“What do you have in mind?” Eli's face was rather passive, but Vic saw the gleam in his eye.

Leaning closer as if someone might be in earshot, though the room was closed off and empty beyond the two men, Vic replied, “You have all those computers, and you've given, as I understand it, more than \$40 million to fund the new AI lab at Valley College. What's the lab called, MAIL?”

Shifting in his leather chair, Eli responded, “Yes, it's the Morse Artificial Intelligence Laboratory. What does that have to do with the loser candidates? Candidates from both parties, I might add.”



“We should get a few graduate assistants to use all that artificial intelligence—AI or whatever it’s called—to destroy the candidates to the point that they have no choice but to drop out, and then we work on getting one good candidate into the race.” He waved a hand as if anticipating Eli’s rejection. “Why take them both out, you may ask? Because Wella Olsen is an idiot, we can’t take the chance he’d win. Conversely, Elaine Lovinggood would not be willing to push forward our issues.”

Shifting uneasily in his chair again, Eli paused to twirl the snifter and reflect on the former president’s statements. Finally, he asked, “What most concerns you about Elaine Lovinggood?”

Vic, now standing and moving toward the fireplace, turned and glanced at the ten-foot-high, built-in mahogany bookcases that lined the other walls of the library, each section filled with classic works of literature, art, music, and architecture. He was in his element. Vic knew Morse was hooked—even if the man didn’t know it yet. Without turning back to face him, Vic stated, “We need a 10 percent tax cut for those making more than half a million a year and a corporate tax cut in the area of 20 percent.”

Surprised but not completely shocked, Eli managed not to sound incredulous as he asked, “And how would our nearly bankrupt country pay for all that, forgetting,

at least for the moment, how unpopular that would be in most of the country?”

“Entitlements would be cut to the point of a zero-sum arrangement. Revenue and expense neutral.”

Eli stood abruptly, pacing around the room while Vic turned to watch his steps across the great library.

“Elaine is a Republican in name only,” Eli pointed out, eyes flickering around the room. Nervous. “There is no way she would support such a platform. And anyway, the platforms of both parties have been worked out and approved.”

“I agree with your statement that she would not go along with it, which is exactly my point, Eli. She can’t become president any more than we can tolerate Wella.”

“So, what is your plan if we could use AI in the remainder of the campaigns?”

Vic turned to look directly at Eli, whose posture was everything the ex-president’s wasn’t. Calm and poised. “We would find the issues most important to middle-of-the-road America and plant negative information on both candidates. At the same time, we look for a better Republican candidate. After both current candidates are ruined, we would also ruin the Democrat, who would also be targeted by our AI onslaught, meaning the

suitable Republican replacement we decide upon would win.”

Chandler hadn't mentioned his desire to run again in 2028 or maybe even 2024 to Eli. Any Republican candidate he supported had to be uninterested in running for the presidency again in 2028.

Eli, with a raised eyebrow, seemed intrigued. With another swirl of his snifter, he said pensively, “That’s never been done; just imagine how hard it would be to introduce a new candidate without the benefit of the national convention and its media coverage. We would also risk throwing the election to the Democrats. And what if Vice President Andrews changed his mind and decided to run? And besides, shouldn’t we wait and see the debate results tomorrow?”

Vic responded, “First, the debate will not change anything, at least in my mind. Second, Andrews wants to retire to his house in Italy, and, finally, you don’t understand what I mean by ‘ruined.’”

The conversation went on. The evening ended with Eli committing to a large donation to the former president.

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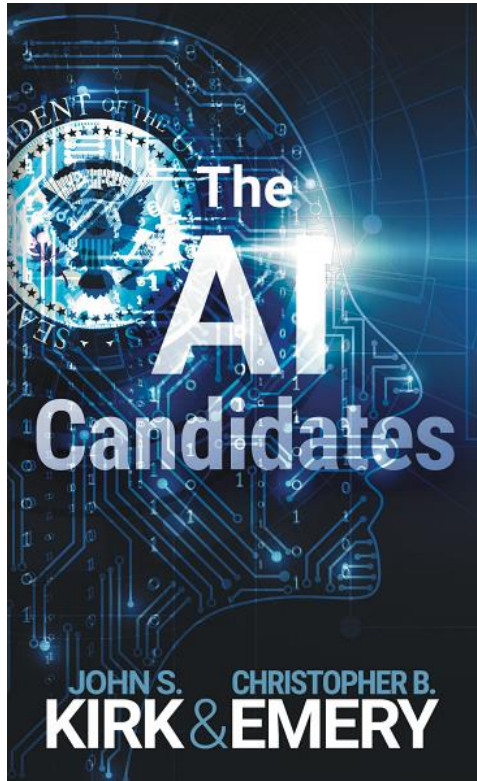
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