

A month after an election that will turn the country over to a new president, Carla Hamilton, fashion model turn politician—and the first African American woman to serve as vice president of the United States—receives startling news: The sitting president has died so she will occupy the Oval Office for only six weeks. She soon discovers that in Washington, D.C. a great deal can happen in six weeks.

## **President Pro Tem**

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# President Pro Tem



A NOVEL BY

**Kelvin L. Reed**

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## CHAPTER ONE

“**M**adame Vice President, I’m sorry to wake you but we have a situation here at the White House that requires your immediate attention.”

Carla Hamilton could feel her heartbeat accelerate. The president’s chief of staff had never awakened her in the middle of the night before. She glanced at the digital clock on the telephone base. Four thirty-seven. Make that early morning. “What is it, Isaac?” she asked before switching the telephone receiver to her right hand and sitting up in her king-size bed. “What’s happened?” She touched a remote control under her pillow to turn on a lamp next to the bed and derived some reassurance from the familiar surroundings.

“Um, well,” the man answered, “I think it’d be best if I explained everything once you arrive. I-I mean...it’s not something I’d like to divulge even on this secure line.”

Carla became even more uneasy. Isaac Gould took pride in his reputation as a cool, analytical man who managed the

president's time and attention with the precision of a skilled barber cutting a customer's hair—and with about as much emotion. Yet for the first time in the eleven months since she had become the titular second most powerful person in the United States, the sixty-year-old chief of staff, eighteen years her senior, seemed a bit rattled. Carla pushed the covers down to her bare, bronze feet and swung her long legs over the side of the bed. “Tell the president I'm on my way.”

“Your motorcade is being arranged as we speak, ma'am, ready to bring you here forthwith,” Isaac informed her. “I can't stress enough how important it is that you come with all deliberate speed.”

Carla closed her eyes, then opened them, trying to compensate for only having slept three and a half hours. She had recently returned from yet another state funeral—this time for a government leader in Europe. Isaac's tone, indicating something was indeed very wrong, concerned her. “I'm on my way,” she replied with a stronger voice, wincing for repeating herself. “Who else has been summoned?” she added, trying to sound more like a woman of substance.

“Please, ma'am, with your permission, I'd like to explain everything when you arrive. We'll meet in the Roosevelt Room.”

“I'll be there shortly,” Carla assured him and hung up. She bounced out of bed, stepped into her slippers and darted into her large walk-in closet. Surrounded by hundreds of shoes and scores of tailor-made, size six suits, she replayed Isaac's words while running her long fingers along the soft shoulders of a few possibilities. He had called her “ma'am” and had said “with your permission.” Since when did he start talking to her like that? A knock on the bedroom door inter-

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rupted her thoughts. Carla turned toward the closet entrance. “Who’s there?”

“It’s Rose, Madame Vice President,” a young woman with a thick Spanish accent replied, her voice muffled by the closed door. “I was woke up and told to help get you ready.”

Carla stepped out of the closet holding a dark blue suit with black trimmings on the collar, lapels and pockets. “Come in, Rose,” she called. A short woman barely in her twenties entered the room slightly dragging her left leg, the result of a childhood accident. She wore blue jeans and a teal housemaid top. Carla noticed the look of surprise on her visitor’s face and realized the young woman had never seen the vice president of the United States clad only in silk pajamas. She handed Rose the suit, then eased over to the foot of the bed and put on a purple bathrobe. “You were awakened? By whom?”

“Some lady at the White House calling for Mr. Gould,” Rose reported. “She say help you get ready *rapido*.”

This seemed strange, Carla thought. The president of the United States is given a valet paid for by the taxpayers. However, besides the Secret Service detail lurking about the Vice President’s Residence, located on the grounds of the United States Naval Observatory, the veep has to make do with a couple of household employees who only clean. In fact, since Carla paid for Rose’s services as a domestic helper out of her own pocket, Isaac had no say-so about her duties. “Did the woman who called say anything else?”

Rose nodded. “She say he say make sure you wear a dark suit.”

Carla shifted her recently pruned eyebrows nearly together with bewilderment. Now Isaac was taking the time to pass on fashion suggestions? The whole situation grew even

more bizarre. She approached Rose and pointed at the suit. "Then I guess this'll do."

"Yes, ma'am. Do you want me to make you some herbal tea or fix you some breakfast?"

"No, thank you, Rose. Just—"

"I'd be glad to do it, Madame Vice President," the woman gushed. She spread the suit onto a four-foot-tall wooden valet in the corner of the room, then turned back to Carla. "It don't take much to fix you a nice—"

"Thank you, Rose, but I'm not hungry and there's no time," Carla replied. "Just have a glass of orange juice waiting for me when I get downstairs, please." She dashed back into the closet, returned with a pair of black shoes and handed them to the young woman. "I'm going to take a quick shower and be on my way." She marched into the bathroom but stepped back to the doorway and spoke in a hushed tone. "Mrs. Jefferson isn't awake, is she?"

Rose shook her head. "No ma'am. Aunt Sofie—" She put her fingers over her lips. "I mean, Mrs. Jefferson's still asleep. We watched a movie, then she go to bed around ten."

Carla smiled to assure the Peruvian native that her use of the familiar title, actually encouraged by "Aunt Sofie," over Carla's objections, would be overlooked. "Thank you, Rose," she said. "That'll be all."

"Yes, ma'am."

It took Carla thirty-five minutes to shower, dress and apply her make-up. Afterward, she stood in front of a full length, three-way mirror and assessed her appearance while listening to a cable news station on a television a few feet from the bed. The main headlines revealed no significant domestic or foreign crisis, not that the silly prattling of the attractive, late twenty-something female anchor would reveal anything sig-

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nificant anyway. Carla leaned closer to the mirror and nodded at her reflection. Although forty-two years old and the birth mother of a teenager, she had the face and body of a much younger woman and couldn't help but take pride in that. The healthy lifestyle she had adopted over twenty-five years ago when she had begun working as a model had served her well.

She fastened her hair with a barrette, leaving several inches to fall below her neck, and rechecked her make-up. Satisfied, she pirouetted to inspect herself and her spacious, comfortable surroundings while rubbing apricot-scented lotion on her hands. "Not bad for a little black orphan girl from Providence, Rhode Island," Carla whispered. She returned to the mirror and smiled as she recalled frequent, past adoring exclamations from her two late husbands:

"Baby, you look so beautiful!"

"Carla, you were by far the loveliest woman at the party!"

Suddenly, she felt lonely. She missed having a man to love, hold onto and make love to at night. God had blessed her with two fine, although somewhat different men whom she had loved very much. But why had He chosen to take them from—"

A loud commercial reminding viewers that Christmas would arrive in a little over two weeks broke her pondering. Carla refocused on Isaac's telephone call: So her boss had finally asked her to do more than attend the funeral of some corrupt foreign leader or make an appearance at some ethnic function. Not a minute too soon, with a mere six weeks to go before handing over leadership of the country to a new president and vice president on January 20. But if a crisis existed, why meet in the Roosevelt Room instead of the Situation Room?

That mystery notwithstanding, Carla was thrilled at finally being summoned by the president to help manage a major crisis but apprehensive about what news she would receive once she reached the White House. She pointed at the woman in the mirror. “No time for excessive primping,” she scolded. “One should never keep the president waiting.” She turned off the television and the lights, then dashed out the door.

**J**ust before five-thirty, Carla entered the windowless Roosevelt Room in the West Wing of the White House, primarily used for small conferences and meetings. Light from the vast, false skylight and thirty recessed overhead fixtures flooded the room. She was surprised to see Isaac sitting near the door at the end of a large conference table, alone. She had expected to see a dozen or so presidential advisors awaiting the entrance of the commander-in-chief. Isaac stood, straightened his tie and tucked it inside the jacket of his rumpled, gray pinstriped suit. His appearance clashed noticeably with the room’s colorful Chippendale and Queen Ann Style furniture. His usually baggy eyes were even more so, and red. He greeted Carla as she neared the table.

“Good morning, Madame Vice President,” he opened. “How was your trip?”

Carla approached the obviously tired man. Both stood five feet, ten inches tall but Carla’s heels gave her the advantage. She found his formality puzzling but returned his greeting and opened her hands. “Where is everybody? Where’s the president?”

“Well, Madame Vice President,” Isaac mumbled. “He—they’re waiting in my office, but the president...” His voice

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trailed off. "Can I have someone bring you something? A bite to eat, some tea or something?"

"No, thank you. I'm fine," Carla answered. "You were telling me about the president?"

"He's not here."

"I can see that," Carla snapped, beginning to lose patience. "I don't understand what's going on, but somebody better tell me," she ordered. "And I mean right now."

"I apologize," Isaac muttered. "This isn't easy." He removed his glasses. "Well, y-you see—"

Just then Carla heard a knock on the door and another man about Isaac's age entered the room. He held a large, black book in his right hand. Carla felt pleased and relieved to see her mentor and predecessor; the man who had until a year ago been vice president. He and Carla shook hands.

"Christian," Carla said. "What are you doing here?"

Christian Witherspoon frowned and turned to Isaac. "Jesus, Isaac, you mean you haven't told her yet?"

Carla rolled her eyes at the resumption of the personal rivalry in which the two men had been engaged for years. Isaac had been opposed to Christian as the president's vice presidential running mate. Christian's lifetime appointment to chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, which had also been opposed by Isaac, allowed him to speak however he wished to whomever he wished. Carla glanced at Isaac, then Christian. "He hasn't told me *what*?"

Isaac ran his hands through his thinning, graying hair. "I was just telling her, Christian, before we were interrupted," he explained, clearly annoyed. He turned back to Carla. "What I've been trying to say and obviously not very well is..." He sighed and took a deep breath. "The chief justice is here to

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administer the presidential oath of office.” He paused and pointed. “To *you*.”

Carla’s heart beat so fast and hard she feared the two men would notice her torso shaking. “To me? W-what do you mean?”

Isaac lowered his head. “The president died earlier this morning in his sleep. For the next six weeks you’ll be president of the United States.”

A month after an election that will turn the country over to a new president, Carla Hamilton, fashion model turn politician—and the first African American woman to serve as vice president of the United States—receives startling news: The sitting president has died so she will occupy the Oval Office for only six weeks. She soon discovers that in Washington, D.C. a great deal can happen in six weeks.

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