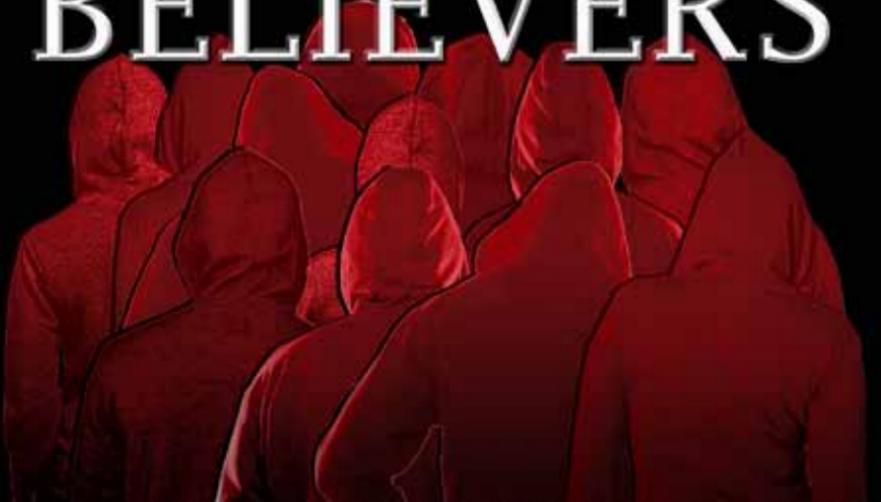


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DOUG RICHARDSON

TRUE BELIEVERS



A NOVEL FROM THE AUTHOR OF *THE SAFETY EXPERT* AND *DARK HORSE*

1

PRESENT DAY

THE PREGNANCY TEST was negative.

It was one of those do-it-yourself kits found in a small cardboard box, strategically placed in the supermarket aisle between the tampons and condoms. Totally disposable. Pee on the plastic stick, wait three minutes, and see if the dot turns blue.

For Gwen, those three minutes might as well have been three hours. She had been late again that October. And with the lateness came hope. And with the hope came a prayer and another failed pregnancy test. Her cycle was a vicious beast. Hard to pin down. And unlike the woman herself, never on time.

If only the harsh feelings had been disposable, too.

Gwen sat on the toilet seat in the master bathroom for a good ten minutes, surrounded by the beauty of antique-glazed tiles and imported

porcelain installed at the turn of the century, but stared only at that damn plastic stick. *Willing* it to turn blue. Then finally cursing it for remaining the same, negative white. Tears followed the brief rage. But they always did, cracking the cool and savvy veneer Gwen had cultivated for over the last twenty years.

Gwen Corbett-Sullivan. A name with a ring and a sterling reputation. Good breeding, her father used to say, was in the heart and not the wallet. But Daddy had never said good breeding hurt so damn much.

She dumped the failed test into a wastebasket under the sink. The aging housekeeper, Geneva, would see to it that it was emptied by the time she returned from her office. So by bedtime, Gwen would wipe away the day's makeup and lipstick with a sterile cotton ball and toss it into an *empty* receptacle, cleansed of any reminder from that horrid morning.

Such had been the ritual for nearly three years now. Every month, when she'd take that test only to find no blue dot or plus sign or double vertical lines developing in that damned little window, it killed her that much more. She would sit in the bathroom and cry, eventually showering off the feelings that she was defective in a hot spray, dress in something crisply Armani, touch up her delicate face with a little blush and powder, stuff the leftover emotions in her empty womb, and head off to the office.

With her maternal duty complete for another twenty-eight days, happiness would have to wait. Fulfillment, somewhere down the road. She speed-dialed her husband's private line in Washington D.C. from her Ford Explorer. After it rang three times, she was certain she would get shuttled off to voicemail. Instead, Will Sullivan picked up.

"This is Will," he answered.

"It's me," said Gwen. Her voice was slightly choked, but she covered it well. "Betcha thought it was Sully."

"When it rang, yeah," said Will. "But then I heard it was a car phone—"

"Dead giveaway."

"Where are you?"

"Just pulling out of the driveway. The leaves are turning. You should see 'em."

"I'll be up for the weekend, so save some for me."

"I'll see what I can do. But me and Mother Nature haven't exactly been getting along."

Will knew what she meant. On first hearing her voice he had thought he would get back to her once she reached her office. He was already behind with his daily staff meeting. But another negative pregnancy test was a priority. "I'm sorry."

There was a dull moment of cellular static between the couple. The tension was real. Then Will, always with the solution, served up some encouragement. "So we go back to Dallas. You give me the date, I'll book that old suite at the Melrose."

"I'd rather not talk about it," she said, her voice cracking. Or was it the cellular? "Not now. So...I saw you on *Nightline*."

"What'd you think?"

Her voice was bolstered by the change in subject matter. "I thought you were really strong on the committee's overall goals. But I don't think Koppel believed you when you said that Justice was on board with the committee's investigation."

"He asked and I answered," he said a bit tersely. Practically his entire key staff was in his office, eyes on him, waiting for the personal call to come to a close. "I'll let the Ladies Justice speak for themselves. They had the opportunity to go on air with me and they bugged out at the last minute."

Both the attorney general, Margie Van Hough, and her right arm, FBI Director Lois Freehold, had been engaged in a proprietary war against Will Sullivan and his committee hell-bent on oversight of the scandal-ridden Food and Drug Administration. In twenty-four hours, at 2 P.M. Eastern time, Will would chair the first round of live televised hearings embarking on what was certain to be a trophied moment in his young career. In Will's opinion, the FBI had bungled *their* two-year investigation of the FDA, leaving the agency ripe for the political picking.

"I can't believe they put on that prick of a shill Bob Jamison instead," said Gwen. "And I really think you let him off the hook when it came to all that money he took from the drug companies."

"Purely tactical. I need him on my side for SB245."

"Was that a spot decision or did someone twist your arm?"

"No arm-twisting. Koppel clued me to the questions during the break, so I made the deal with Jamison right there in the studio. If I choose, I can come back and hammer him anytime I want if he doesn't go my way when it comes to the floor vote."

“That’s fine and dandy, sweetie. But what works on the Hill doesn’t necessarily work for TV,” she reminded him, sounding every bit as patronizing as she could muster. “Ma and Pa America don’t know your deals from their local Wal-Mart. You get hit, you hit back. Nobody gets off the hook unless they deserve it.” He was *her* husband, *her* partner, and *her* political prodigy. And hell if she would ever let him forget it.

Will switched back to the subject of progeny in an attempt to close out the conversation. “I’m thinking the sooner the better, hon. I say we pick ourselves up and get back into the saddle, so to speak.”

“I’m the horse, remember?” said Gwen. “I need to be the one to say when I get back in the stirrups.”

Will knew to dump the subject. She would rebound in her own quick time. “Okay, fine. What else?”

“I can tell you’re in a crew call,” said Gwen.

“What was your first hint?” he asked. “My precious staff get so little of me as it is.” With that, Will gave a wink to his silent clan, spread out on the chairs and the sofa while the boss held court from behind his desk.

Gwen could picture them. Levinthal, Will’s legislative director. Sandra Corwin, director of communications. Four ferrets—Gwen’s description of either legislative assistants or legislative correspondents. Two different jobs, but both requiring the same masochistic attributes of youth, character, and an unmitigated willingness to stay up the ass of an issue.

“Give my regards to La Roy. I’ll betcha he’s on the sofa, boots on the coffee table, halfway through something called Samoan java.”

Will Sullivan let his gaze swivel across his Senate office to his chief of staff, Wild Bill La Roy. Half-Seminole Indian, half-Haitian, and one hundred percent American, whose dress de rigueur was pressed jeans and a white, open-collared shirt hugging a small pot belly bulging over a silver rodeo belt buckle. Then there were those trademark lizard-skin cowboy boots—La Roy was rumored to carry a small, semiauto handgun inside the right boot. If asked, he would always grin and deny that he ever packed heat. La Roy’s look was capped off by a gold Rolex and a thin platinum neck chain, all in stark contrast to the darkest, most chocolate-brown skin a black man had ever been blessed with.

“She’s got your number, Bill,” Will said to La Roy.

“Tell the Boston Ballbuster that one, she’s making *my* meeting go way too fuckin’ long,” answered La Roy. “And two, that if she keeps you

on the phone any longer, a black man's gonna start making policy in the name of her husband's lily-white uppity fuckin' state."

Gwen heard La Roy over the car speaker. "Okay, you gotta go. So do I."

They said their good-byes and Will hung up, catching a wide grin from La Roy and a line that drew titters from the crew. "What, y'all forget to say 'I love you'?"

"After twelve years, we don't need to say it," said Will, returning to the docket. He had to hurry up and cut through the chaff of the daily legislative agenda so he could get on with the ten-minute underground walk over to the Dirksen Building for his last and final prep-day before the FDA hearings. Tomorrow was his big show. And the star wasn't about to go on without a full dress rehearsal.

"Earnest is as Earnest says. Is that it?" teased La Roy, hooking Will simply for the sheer amusement of the staff. He loved calling Will by his own pet nickname, *Earnest*. It came from Will's uncanny ability to stare a constituent in the eye and, no matter how great the gulf between them, or how deep the bullshit, seem just that. Earnest in every way. As for the marriage part? La Roy had seen better. He'd also seen worse. Two of them his own.

"Wasting my time," said La Roy. "Let's move."

"Wasting *your* time?" mocked the senator. "Okay. Moving on. Who's chasing the Speaker on the proposed AFDC cutbacks?"

"I'm on it, Senator," said one of the ferrets, seemingly out of breath before she had gotten her first words out.

"You're not *on* it," barked La Roy. "You *own* it. The job's about accountability, kiddo."

Will's Amtel beeped with a scrolling message:

COMMITTEE READY FOR YOU IN TEN.

Will double-checked the Amtel against his watch. "Finish up with me." He let his arms stretch out over an oak desk formerly belonging to Huey Long, then shook them as if he was an Olympic swimmer about to dive head-first into a piranha-infested two-hundred-meter medley. He stood, swung on his off-the-rack, navy, forty-two regular—the same ex-

act size he had worn since graduating prep school—and stepped into a private bathroom to check his hair and tie.

With a simple thumb-gesture La Roy successfully shooed out the rest of the staff, half of whom never got to their own agendas, docketts, or questions.

“I betcha Mrs. Sullivan’s got you a closet fulla Italian threads back up in you-know-where.”

“In my uppity house in my uppity state?” asked Will.

“Versace?”

“I might have had a couple.”

“But would you ever wear one?”

“Let’s just say I mothballed the fleet at the same time I sold the Porsche.” The flashy car, the suits, the attitude—all gone when Will finished the booze.

La Roy smiled. Will Sullivan was hardly a man of the people, but boy, he was sure trying. Will was convinced that’s what had got him elected to the House, then four years later, the U.S. Senate. Man-of-the-people talk. Man-of-the-people walk. That and he was the first politician to come out of an alcoholic’s closet on TV. Fox’s popular *Overnight with Buddy Prince*. On the nationally syndicated program, the reformed boozier made the kind of statement reserved only for Alcoholics Anonymous meetings:

My name is Will Sullivan, and I am an alcoholic.

Will had ridden his public sobriety wave into office with help from his friend and sponsor, Bill La Roy, a wife who believed in him, and a couple of well-fitting, department-store suits.

“You know Versace wasn’t really killed by that spree-killer-guy?” said La Roy. “I read it was the Italian mob. He was up to his eyelashes in their confederate cash, but wasn’t paying the vig.”

The Amtel beeped again.

LUNCH?

Leaning over his desk, Will punched up a one key, pre-programmed response.

COME IN, PLEASE.

Exactly three seconds later, that oft-polished plank of a door opened and shut. Myriam stood on her mark, just inside the threshold, medium-sized, medium-aged, medium-looks, with medium-brown hair. And that's just the way she liked it. Anonymous and totally accommodating. Just what a U.S. senator needed in a personal secretary.

"I've got you down for Ray Hensel with the Lobby Reform Institute. Billy's Green Room, one-thirty."

"Move him," said Will. "See what he has next month. Cocktails. And make sure it's pushed up against some kind of sit-down, black-tie event so I have an excuse to leave early."

"See what I can do. And in his stead?"

"I'm taking Senator Akira to lunch. Let his office pick. Just as long as it's not that far off campus."

"What if he wants the CDR?"

The Congressional Dining Room. Will was actually fond of the in-house eatery. But only for breakfast. At the beginning of a new session, he'd regularly show up early, just when the doors opened. There he'd always find a freshman congressman or youngish senator. He'd invite himself to sit, he'd shake his hand, then respectfully introduce himself as if they had never met, setting himself up to have his own ear bent. "Give 'em a platform and let 'em talk," ol' Sully used to say. "Politics is a pair of good ears and never fogettin' to fix them potholes."

That was from back when Will used to listen to his father.

La Roy had a different take on it. Politics is power. Power is addictive. And recovering alcoholics *need* a vice. Most end up as chain-smokers. Will quit smoking the same day he quit booze. La Roy, himself a former fall-down drunkard, hooked up with hourly doses of gourmet coffee, single white women, and conspiracy theories—the more outlandish the better.

"Akira won't want the CDR," said Will. "My esteemed cochair from Hawaii wants to grind me one last time before tomorrow. He won't want to shake that many hands while he's trying to sell me softballs. Where's Allison?"

"On her way," Myriam said, straightening out Will's tie. "In her case, probably at a dead run."

"And don't you like to see them young, white things on the move?" said La Roy in a not-so-subtle attempt at getting under Myriam's leathery skin.

Myriam fired him an ugly, sideways glare. The man reeked of impropriety and, in her opinion, did not belong in the building, let alone the office of a United States senator. She had made a deal with Will that over her resignation would she take an order or instruction from Bill La Roy.

In her lime-green Hush Puppies, Allison Flannery skidded around a marbled corner, meeting up with Will and La Roy just before the doors of the Russell Building's private elevator closed. She was twenty-five, freckled from head to toe, with a frizz of radiant red hair. Flushed and panting from sprinting down the entire length of Pennsylvania Avenue, she swung off her backpack and shucked her mohair sweater. The backpack contained so many files it shook the elevator when she dumped it onto the floor.

Allison looked right at La Roy and made sure she used his standard. "I *own* this speech."

"Good girl," he said proudly. The smart ones learned fast. Allison was displaying promise.

"You showed it to Bregman?" asked Will, referring to the White House's unofficial liaison to the FDA hearings.

"Showed it to him," she said. "And I swear, sir, as I'm standing right here, Bregman walked me across the street and straight into the Oval Office."

Without missing a beat, La Roy turned instantly abrasive. "That sorry Southern sack of shit! He's worse than a barnyard dog."

"Bregman?" asked a stunned Allison.

"Not Bregman," rified La Roy. "The president. Did he ask you to do the Dance of the Seven Fucking Veils?"

Allison was lost, shocked, and too mystified to respond. That and she was locked in La Roy's surly gaze. Will cut in, righting the subject. "You showed the speech to the president?"

"Actually, sir," said Allison, regaining focus, "it was more in the manner of performance art."

"Ah-hah!" shouted La Roy.

Will ignored La Roy and allowed his interest to pique. He had known for some time that the White House had an acute eye on him. And hell if he didn't like basking in the glow of the presidency.

"Did he give you any notes?" asked Will.

“Other than ask me to read it again?” Allison shook her head and sneaked a glance at La Roy, who was rolling his eyes. Allison was such a muffin. Will could see La Roy cataloguing every drop of her young sweat into his sub-sexual cortex. Just as President Addison most likely had.

“Well done. Leave the speech with Myriam and she’ll set aside thirty minutes this afternoon for us to lock it.” Will gave Allison a confident wink. His opening speech was the first big piece that Allison had outlined, run down the dog on, and *owned*. Finally, Will had given her an hour of dictated notes and the go-ahead to write the all-important opener. Eleven drafts, twenty hours of lost sleep, and six pints of Rum Raisin later, she had delivered a spirited little masterpiece.

They’d been walking the connecting tunnel between the Russell and Dirksen Buildings, when La Roy made a scheduled pit stop into the nearest men’s room. Will had a mind to join him when Allison tugged at his arm.

“Senator? I don’t mean to be a bother. But I have to ask. I don’t think Mr. La Roy likes me very much.”

Will read the pain on her face. La Roy was her superior—and a man who sometimes appeared out of control.

“It’s an act,” said Will.

“Excuse me, Senator?”

“All the bluster. Bill La Roy’s a puppy dog in wolf’s clothing. That and he doesn’t care much for our commander in chief. It’s a Florida thing.”

“The president and Mr. La Roy?”

“They go way back,” said Will. “Plus the last time La Roy saw the inside of the Oval Office was at a NAACP luncheon with Jimmy Carter.”

“Oh, gawd. I feel so young.” She blushed. “I think I was about only eight years old back then.”

“There!” said Will, his hands up and framing her face in his fingers. “That’s your secret, Allison. Stay young. And as long as people underestimate you, you’ll retain the element of surprise.”

Allison beamed and almost followed him into the men’s room, but caught herself short of the threshold. She took a deep breath. She couldn’t believe she was there. In Washington. Making policy. Working for *him*. “He is *soooo* amazing,” she sighed to herself. Then she spun a one-eighty just to make sure nobody had heard her.