

BALANCE OF POWER

RICHARD NORTH
PATTERSON



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BALANCE OF POWER

Richard North Patterson

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For Philip Rotner

A well-regulated militia being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed.

—THE SECOND AMENDMENT TO
THE UNITED STATES CONSTITUTION

CHARACTERS

THE WHITE HOUSE

Kerry Francis Kilcannon, President of the United States

Lara Costello Kilcannon, First Lady of the United States

Ellen Penn, Vice President of the United States

Clayton Slade, Chief of Staff to the President

Kit Pace, Press Secretary to the President

Peter Lake, head of the President's Secret Service detail

Liz Curry, Director of Legislative Affairs

Alex Cole, Congressional Liaison

Jack Sanders, Chief Domestic Policy Advisor

Connie Coulter, Press Secretary to the First Lady

Francesca Thibault, White House Social Secretary

THE FIRST LADY'S FAMILY

Inez Costello, Lara's mother

Joan Costello Bowden, Lara's younger sister

John Bowden, Lara's brother-in-law

Marie Bowden, Lara's niece

Mary Costello, Lara's youngest sister

THE UNITED STATES SENATE

Senator Francis Xavier Fasano of Pennsylvania, Senate Majority Leader

Senator Charles Hampton of Vermont, Senate Minority Leader

Senator Chad Palmer of Ohio, Chairman of the Commerce Committee

Senator Paul Harshman of Idaho

Senator Cassie Rollins of Maine

Senator Frank Ayala of New Mexico

Senator Vic Coletti of Connecticut

Senator Macdonald Gage of Kentucky

Senator Dave Ruckles of Oklahoma

Senator Jack Slezak of Michigan

Senator Leo Weller of Montana

Senator Betsy Shapiro of California

Senator Kate Jarman of Vermont

Senator Hank Westerly of Nebraska

THE GUN LOBBY

Charles Dane, President of the Sons of the Second Amendment (“SSA”)

Martin Bresler, former President of the Gun Sports Coalition

Bill Campton, Communications Director for the SSA

Carla Fell, Legislative Director for the SSA

Jerry Kirk, Vice President of the Gun Sports Coalition

Kelsey Landon, former senator from Louisiana and outside legislative strategist for the SSA

THE LEXINGTON ARMS COMPANY

George Callister, President and CEO

Mike Reiner, Vice President of Marketing

Norman Conn, Manager of Quality Control

COSTELLO VERSUS THE LEXINGTON ARMS COMPANY, ET AL.

Sarah Dash, co-counsel for Mary Costello

Robert Lenihan, co-counsel for Mary Costello

John Nolan, counsel for Lexington Arms

Harrison Fancher, counsel for the SSA

Gardner W. Bond, Judge of the United States District Court for the Northern District of California

Avram Gold, outside counsel to President Kilcannon

Evan Pritchard, counsel for Martin Bresler

Angelo Rotelli, Judge of the Superior Court for the City and County of San Francisco

OTHER VICTIMS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Laura Blanchard, a sophomore at Stanford University

Henry Serrano, a security guard

Felice Serrano, his widow

George Serrano, his son

David Walsh, a security guard

THE WITNESSES IN COSTELLO VERSUS THE LEXINGTON ARMS COMPANY, ET AL.

Dr. Callie Hines, trauma surgeon, San Francisco General Hospital

Charles Monk, homicide inspector, San Francisco Police

Ben Gehringer, felon, member of The Liberty Force, a white supremacist group

George Johnson, felon, member of The Liberty Force

Dr. Frederick Glass, expert witness for Lexington Arms

Dr. Larry Walters, expert witness for Mary Costello

Dr. David Roper, expert witness for Mary Costello

THE MEDIA

Cathie Civitch of NBC, interviewer

Taylor Yarborough of ABC, interviewer

Carole Tisone, San Francisco Chronicle reporter

THE LOBBYISTS

Tony Calvo of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce

Mary Bryant of the National Association of Manufacturers

JOHN METRILLO OF THE NATIONAL FEDERATION OF INDEPENDENT BUSINESSES

THE PRESIDENT'S FAMILY

Michael Kilcannon, Kerry's father

Mary Kilcannon, Kerry's mother

James J. Kilcannon, Kerry's brother and predecessor as Senator from New Jersey, assassinated while seeking the Democratic Presidential nomination

OTHERS

Elise Hampton, wife of Senator Chuck Hampton

Allie Palmer, wife of Senator Chad Palmer

John Halloran, District Attorney for the City and County of San Francisco

Marcia Harding, Chief of Halloran's Domestic Violence Unit

Caroline Masters, Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court

Anna Chen, Lara's bridesmaid

Nakesha Hunt, Lara's bridesmaid

Linda Mendez, Lara's bridesmaid

The Reverend Bob Christy, Head of the Christian Commitment

Warren Colby, former United States Senator from Maine and predecessor to Senator Cassie Rollins

Leslie Shoop, Chief of Staff to Senator Rollins

Lance Jarrett, President and CEO of Silicon Valley's largest chip maker

Rep. Thomas Jencks, Speaker of the United States House of Representatives

The Prime Minister of England

The Prime Minister of Israel

The President of the Palestine Liberation Organization

Mahmoud Al Anwar, terrorist and leader of Al Qaeda

PART ONE

**THE
WEDDING**

JULY 4–LABOR DAY WEEKEND

ONE

FEELING THE GUN AGAINST THE NAPE OF HER NECK, JOAN Bowden froze.

Her consciousness narrowed to the weapon she could not see: her vision barely registered the cramped living room, the images on her television—the President and his fiancée, opening the Fourth of July gala beneath the towering obelisk of the Washington Monument. She could feel John's rage through the cold metal on her skin, smell the liquor on his breath.

“Why?” she whispered.

“You wanted him.”

He spoke in a dull, emphatic monotone. *Who?* she wanted to ask. But she was too afraid; with panic akin to madness, she mentally scanned the faces from the company cookout they had attended hours before. Perhaps Gary—they had talked for a time.

Desperate, she answered, “I don't want anyone.”

She felt his hand twitch. “You don't want *me*. You have contempt for me.”

Abruptly, his tone had changed to a higher pitch, paranoid and accusatory, the prelude to the neurotic hysteria which issued from some unfathomable recess of his brain. Two nights before, she had awakened, drenched with sweat, from the nightmare of her own death.

Who would care for Marie?

Moments before, their daughter had sat at the kitchen table, a portrait of dark-haired intensity as she whispered to the doll for whom she daily set a place. Afraid to move, Joan strained to see the kitchen from the corner of her eye. John's remaining discipline was to wait until Marie had vanished; later their daughter seemed to have developed a preternatural sense of impending violence which warned her to take flight. A silent minuet of abuse, binding daughter to father.

Marie and her doll were gone.

“Please,” Joan begged.

The cords of her neck throbbed with tension. The next moment could be fateful: she had learned that protest enraged him, passivity insulted him.

Slowly, the barrel traced a line to the base of her neck, then pulled away.

Joan's head bowed. Her body shivered with a spasm of escaping breath.

She heard him move from behind the chair, felt him staring down at her. Fearful not to look at him, she forced herself to meet his gaze.

With an open palm, he slapped her.

Her head snapped back, skull ringing. She felt blood trickling from her lower lip.

John placed the gun to her mouth.

Her husband. The joyful face from her wedding album, now dark-eyed and implacable, the 49ers' shirt betraying the paunch on his too-thin frame.

Smiling grimly, John Bowden pulled the trigger.

Recoiling, Joan cried out at the hollow metallic click. The sounds seemed to work a chemical change in him—a psychic wound which widened his eyes. His mouth opened, as if to speak; then he turned, staggering, and reeled toward their bedroom.

Slumping forward, Joan covered her face.

Soon he would pass out. She would be safe then; in the morning, before he left, she would endure his silence, the aftershock of his brutality and shame.

At least Marie knew only the silence.

Queasy, Joan stumbled to the bathroom in the darkened hallway, a painful throbbing in her jaw. She stared in the mirror at her drawn face, not quite believing the woman she had become. Blood trickled from her swollen lip.

She dabbed with tissue until it stopped. For another moment Joan stared at herself. Then, quietly, she walked to her daughter's bedroom.

Marie's door was closed. With painstaking care, her mother turned the knob, opening a crack to peep through.

Cross-legged, Marie bent over the china doll which once had been her grandmother's. Joan felt a spurt of relief; the child had not seen them, did not see her now. Watching, Joan was seized by desperate love.

With slow deliberation, Marie raised her hand and slapped the vacant china face.

Gently, the child cradled the doll in her arms. "I won't do that again," she promised. "As long as you're good."

Tears welling, Joan backed away. She went to the kitchen sink and vomited.

She stayed there for minutes, hands braced against the sink. At last she turned on the faucet. Watching her sickness swirl down the drain, Joan faced what she must do.

Glancing over her shoulder, she searched for the slip of paper with his telephone number, hidden in her leather-bound book of recipes. *Call me*, he had urged. *No matter the hour*.

She must not wake her husband.

Lifting the kitchen telephone from its cradle, Joan crept back to the living room, praying for courage. On the television, a graceful arc of fireworks rose above the obelisk.

TWO

PRESIDENT KERRY FRANCIS KILCANNON AND HIS FIANCÉE, Lara Costello, watched as a red flare roared above the Mall, bursting into a galaxy of falling stars which framed the Washington Monument.

For this rarity, an evening alone, they had left the annual party for staffers and retreated to the porch on the second floor of the White House. Spread across their table was a white linen cloth, a picnic of cheese and fruit, and a bottle of light chardonnay which cooled in a silver cylinder, a gift from the President of France. Lara took Kerry's hand.

“When I was six,” she told him, “our father took us to the fireworks at Crissy Field. I remember holding his hand, watching all those explosions above the Golden Gate Bridge. That's my last memory of being with him.”

Turning from the fireworks, Kerry studied the sculpted face—intense dark eyes, high cheekbones, pale skin framed by jet-black hair—which, to her bemusement, had helped Lara rise from a semianonymous political reporter for the *New York Times* to celebrity as a television journalist. Like many women, Kerry supposed, her self-concept had been fixed in adolescence: then she had not thought of herself as beautiful—though she surely was—but as the perfect student, the dutiful oldest daughter who must help her mother and sisters. It was the dutiful daughter who had achieved success driven to make Inez Costello proud, to free her younger sisters from the struggle caused by the father's desertion. Even at thirty-two, Kerry knew, her family still defined her.

“What I was hoping you'd remember,” he said, “is the scene from *To Catch a Thief*. Cary Grant and Grace Kelly in Monaco, watching fireworks from her hotel room.”

Lara faced him with an amused, appraising look. “I remember that they lay down on the couch, and then the camera panned away. The fireworks were a metaphor.”

“Uh-huh. Very 1950s.”

Leaning forward, Lara kissed him, a lingering touch of the lips, then rested her cheek against his shoulder. “This is the twenty-first century,” she told him. “No metaphors required.”

Afterward, they lay in his canopied bed listening to the last, faint whistling of fireworks. One table lamp still glowed—making love, and after, both needed to see the other's face.

Smiling, she lightly mussed his hair. "You're not too bad," she told him. "At least as Presidents go"

As she intended, this elicited the boyish grin which lit his face and crinkled the corners of his eyes. There had been too little lightness in Kerry's life. Even his first success in politics, election to the Senate at age thirty, had been as surrogate for his brother, Senator James Kilcannon, assassinated in San Francisco while running for President. Lara had been nineteen then; she remembered watching the telecast of James's funeral, the haunted look on Kerry's face as he attended to his widowed mother. So that when, as a reporter for the *New York Times*, she had met him seven years later, the first thing she noticed was not his fine-featured face, incongruously youthful for a potential President, nor his thatch of chestnut hair, nor even the scar at the corner of one eye. It was the startling contradiction presented by the eyes themselves: their green-flecked blue irises, larger than most, gave Lara the sense—rare in a white male politician—of someone who had seen more sadness than most. Then, she had thought this an illusion, abetted by her memory of the funeral; only later, when Kerry shared the private history he had entrusted to almost no one, did she understand how true it was.

"If so," he answered, "you're free to take it personally. Tongue-tied Catholic boys from Newark don't usually get much practice. Lord knows that Meg and I weren't much good to each other, in any way."

If only, Lara thought, Meg could be dismissed so simply. But her existence affected them still—publicly, because Kerry's lack of an annulment had forestalled them from marrying in the Church; privately, because their love affair had begun while Kerry was married. Its secrecy had saved Kerry his chances of becoming President: only after his divorce and the California primary, when Kerry himself had been wounded by a would-be assassin, had they come together in public.

Now she touched the scar the bullet had left, a red welt near his heart. "We've been good to each other," she said. "And very lucky."

To Lara, he seemed to sense the sadness beneath her words, the lingering regrets which shadowed their new life. "Just lucky?" he answered softly. "In public life, we're a miracle. Rather like my career."

This aspect of his worldview—that good fortune was an accident—was, in Lara's mind, fortified by his certainty that gunfire had made him President: first by killing James, the deserving brother; then by wounding Kerry, causing the wave of sympathy which, last November, had helped elect him by the narrowest of margins, with California tipping the balance. But this had also given him a mission, repeated in speech after speech: "to eradicate gun violence as surely as we ended polio."

"Speaking of miracles," she asked, "is your meeting with the gun companies still a go?"

"A handful of companies," Kerry amended. "The few brave souls willing to help keep four-year-olds from killing themselves with that new handgun Dad bought for their protection. If you listen to the SSA, tomorrow will be the death knell of gun rights in America." Suddenly, he smiled. "Though I was preparing for the meeting, I discovered that it's you who's hell-bent on disarming us."

"Me?"

“You, and your entire profession.” Turning, Kerry removed a magazine from the briefing book on his nightstand; as he flipped its pages, Lara saw that it was the monthly publication of the Sons of the Second Amendment, perhaps Washington's most powerful lobby, and that its cover featured a venomous cartoon of Kerry as Adolf Hitler.

“‘Surveys,’” Kerry read, “‘have shown that most reporters for the major media live in upper-class homes, head and shoulders above most of us in fly-over country. Many took their education at Ivy League universities where they protested the Vietnam conflict, smoked dope, loved freely, and ingested every ultraliberal cause their professors threw at them.’” Pausing, he said wryly, “Truth tell, they're onto something. What was wrong with *you*?”

Lara propped her head up with one hand. “My mother cleaned houses. So I was afraid to lose my scholarship. Besides, I missed the war by twenty years.”

“It hardly matters—you caught up soon enough. Listen to this: ‘Once they graduated, they faced the prospect of going to work. What better way to earn a fat paycheck and change the world than become a reporter for ABC, or CBS or NBC or CNN or write for the *New York Times*?’”

“That's *you*,” Kerry added, fixing her with a mock-accusatory gaze, and then continued. “‘Having become gainfully employed, these men and women from Yale and Harvard and Brown and Princeton brought their own biases with them. Many do not know anyone who owns guns. Their only exposure to firearms comes when they report on the carnage left by a deranged shooter going “postal” . . .’”

“How about knowing someone who actually got *shot*?” Lara interjected. “Does that count?”

“Oh, that? That just means you've lost your objectivity. Like me.”

The rueful remark held an undertone of bitterness. This involved far more, Lara knew, than what his opponents claimed—anger at his brother's death, or his own near death. Kerry was sick of bloodshed, weary of meeting, year after year, with families who had lost loved ones, of trying to comfort them with the same empty phrases. For him, his failure was both political and deeply personal. And Kerry did not live with failure—especially regarding guns—well.

“Sooner or later,” Lara assured him, “you'll get Congress to pass a decent gun law.”

Kerry raised his eyebrows, exchanging bitterness for an irony tinged with good-natured frustration. “Before or *after* we get married?”

Lara smiled, unfazed. “That I can't tell you. But certainly before I find a job.”

This was another blind curve on the road to marriage. Though she was developing a degree of fatalism, the resignation of a would-be First Lady to the limitations of her new life, Lara had always been independent, beholden to no one for support or a sense of who she was. That Kerry understood this did not change what she would lose by marrying him—her own identity. Already she had been forced to take leave from NBC: the potential for conflicts of interest, or at least their appearance—that a powerful network might profit by employing the President's fiancée—also applied to any other segment of the media. A brief flirtation with the presidency of the Red Cross—based on her high

profile as a television journalist and experience in war zones—had floundered on the fear that major donors might want something from President Kilcannon. Other jobs had similar problems, and the best ones, Lara acknowledged, would take away from her public duties and her private time with Kerry. “I’m sorry,” she said at last. “I was being a brat. It may not seem so, but you’re actually more important to me than running the Red Cross.”

Though he knew this, or at least should, to Lara his expression betrayed a certain relief. “Then your fate is sealed, I’m afraid.”

“I guess it is,” she answered dryly. “I’m a fool for love.”

Once more he drew her close. “The thing is,” he continued, “I’m forty-three. Even if we started tomorrow, by the time our first son or daughter graduates from college I’ll be on Social Security. There’s nothing there’s any left.”

“Tell that to the Pope.”

“Oh, I have. I even mentioned that Meg couldn’t stand the thought of children.” There was a different tone in his voice, Lara thought; hand gently touching her chin, he raised her face to his. “And, at last, he’s heard me.”

She felt a tingle of surprise. “The annulment?”

Kerry grinned. “Yes. That.”

Astonished, Lara pulled back to look at him. “When?”

“Yesterday.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was in Pittsburgh.” There was new light in his eyes, and he spoke more softly. “This just seemed like a better time and place.”

Knowing how much he wanted this, Lara felt the depth of her love for him. This moment was the last threshold, she knew, before she entered the hall of mirrors which was the Presidency, the omnipresent, often merciless scrutiny which could change lives and warp marriages until even the most private act assumed a public significance. Briefly, she thought of her abortion, felt the familiar stab of fear. Then she thought of Kerry, and imagined their children.

“Is Labor Day too soon?” she asked, and kissed him.

Later, they turned to the practical. It began with her wistful comment, “Let’s run away. Or at least

have a private wedding—maybe at the Inn at Little Washington.”

“Besieged by the media?” Kerry asked. “With helicopters circling? We'd look like Madonna—except that the public would hate us for it.”

“Of course,” she answered dryly. “How could I forget our stockholders?” She emitted a brief sigh. “I was thinking about us, of all people. And my family. You and I may be public people, but they're not used to this.”

Quietly, Kerry pondered that. Her family, as he had learned, was as complex as most, their relations more fraught than many. But these realities lived beneath a surface which, for image-makers, was the stuff of dreams. For Kerry, there was no one left; two months before, quite suddenly, he had lost his beloved mother. But Lara had two sisters, a niece, and a handsome mother who, collectively, would be catnip for any Democratic media consultant worth his fees—the Hispanic cleaning woman who had raised three bright and attractive daughters, seen them through college, and who with the two youngest girls would now watch the oldest become the new First Lady. And though Kerry did not say this, Lara knew that his advisors would envision uses for her family beyond attending their wedding.

“I won't have them exploited,” she said. “How many Presidential relatives begin by thinking it's so wonderful, then find out too late their lives will never be the same.”

She saw resistance in his face, the wish to believe—despite all he knew—that this time would be different. “That sounds a little dire,” he answered. “For my part, I'll never let my people turn the Costello family into reality TV.”

Faintly, Lara smiled. “Then you might begin with Clayton.”

At this mention of Kerry's Chief of Staff, his closest friend and protector, Kerry smiled back. “Clayton? If he wants to be Best Man, he'll remember which one of us is President.” Pausing, Lara assured her, “Seriously, I worry about them, too.”

“I know you do.”

The telephone rang.

Distractedly, Kerry picked it up. “It's midnight on the Fourth of July,” he wryly told the operator. “Are we at war?”

Pausing, Kerry listened. His eyes grew hooded, his face sober. “Put her through,” he ordered.

“Who is it?” Lara murmured.

Covering the telephone, Kerry met her gaze. “Your sister Joan. For me.”

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