

IN GOD WE TRUST

BOOK I

MILLENNIUM

I am quite sure now that often, very often, in matters concerning religion and politics a man's reasoning powers are not above the monkey's.

- Mark Twain

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CHAPTER 1

Dante Jefferson Washington was a black man in America, whatever that meant. He wasn't really sure. In the past it would have meant he was a slave. But today it could mean something completely different—like he was supposed to be good at hoops. Besides, he wasn't really *black* black. In reality, his skin had that milky tinge of *café au lait*, or maybe *caffè latte* or *macchiato*, depending on the season. He was a Starbuck's-hyphenated American because, evidently, his ancestors had conspired in some unspeakable mixing of the races. Hell, maybe he descended from ol' General George hisself.

But Dante knew the anomaly of his life was not his skin color. It was his politics. He was conservative, actually, *a* conservative. In truth he was young, educated, urbane, a lover of *jazz* and blues, and considered himself socially, well, broadminded. Every morning he stood before the mirror and stared at this *caffè latte* man named after an Italian poet, perhaps descended from the Great White Father of his country. No matter. At the dawn of the New Millennium in the U.S. of A., one was black or white, liberal or conservative—there could be no mixing of these bloodlines. On Capitol Hill he was a black man, and a conservative—a true freak of nature.

Why? Well, he supposed that was a complicated question.

He rolled onto his back, resisting the morning glare in a semi-comatose state, his mind jumping from thought to thought, as it skirted along the edges of consciousness. It was moments like this he relished, when the right brain could freely associate and occasionally spark insights of perfect clarity to solve some vexing problem of the night before.

He'd be the first to admit there were advantages to his racial classification—probably helped him get his Deputy Chief of Staff job with Winston James Sinclair, the junior senator from South Carolina—or “DubyaJay” as he was called down home. It wasn't Affirmative Action or an explicit quota, just some ill-defined political need for ‘diversity.’ He

supposed it had all started with Strom Thurmond, the senior senator from South Carolina. A living legend—Ol’ Strom was never going to die and more power to him—Thurmond had remade himself several times over from the beginning to the end of this century. He had performed a complete one-eighty from Dixiecrat segregationist at mid-century to leading the charge for integration and political representation for Southern blacks a generation later. Politics, especially Southern politics, made for strange contortions and if you thought about it too deeply you’d be paralyzed by the contradictions.

With Ol’ Strom leading the charge and hiring his first black staffer in the eighties, it wasn’t long before Jesse Helms and the rest of the Dixieland pols got with the program. By now there was a small cadre of Dante’s fellow “minority” staffers on the Hill representing the crescent of the Old South from Virginia all the way to Texas. The politicians were spreading minorities like rainbow sprinkles on Baskin and Robbins’ single scoop of vanilla and calling it 41 flavors. Hell, he guessed it made everybody feel better about themselves and how inclusive we’d all become. But Dante would not play the fool.

He supposed coming of age in the Reagan era was partly why he was a conservative. The other part was his personal pride and resentment of the racial categories of the Left. He wanted to make his mark on his own merits, not some label attached to his skin color. It wasn’t “black pride,” it was bigger than that. He knew he had what it took to make a difference and had laid out a path: a few years as Senate staffer, contribute to a successful re-election campaign, then help organize a winning presidential campaign and land a plum staff job. The ultimate goal would be to run for office himself. Congress? Senate? Mayor of Chicago? Who knew? But to compete he needed power, and political success would give him the leverage he needed. All he had to do was keep from getting blown up in the media minefield along the way, because public scandal was really the only natural enemy of the political class these days.

Nevertheless, he appreciated the irony. Hired as the token ‘minority,’ Dante had never really been conscious of his “blackness” until he reached high school and experienced his first Black History Month. He remembered wondering why there wasn’t a white, Jewish, or Chinese History Month. But even then, with constant reminders since, the racial label hadn’t really stuck. He wasn’t sure why, probably due to his parents’ attitudes and basic socioeconomics.

Sure, his parents were black—an equally light shade—but their own experience had probably caused them to insulate their son from racial self-consciousness. His father rarely spoke of it, but his mother had alluded to certain events that occurred back in the 70s when they were

newly married and both students at the University of Chicago Law School. Dante's father Bernard had run for Alderman of the 5th Ward of Hyde Park that surrounded the law school. But he'd suffered an ignominious defeat at the hands of the local political machine; fellow Democrats, of course. He'd been unfairly attacked as being an outsider—a Detroit native and an academic elitist. Most damning was a charge that he wasn't really "black" enough to represent the residents of the South Side. By the time Dante was ready to enter grade school his father had taken a job in corporate law. Soon after they joined the white flight and moved to tonier Highland Park, north of the city. So, growing up in a racially-mixed, wealthy neighborhood, attending private schools, separatism had never been raised as an issue, which is exactly how his parents wanted it, even though they remained nominal Democrats.

Later, there was Columbia University and New York City where the way Dante dressed and spoke marked him as different, causing the PC police to question his racial authenticity. Coming from a conservative Southern Baptist tradition only gave them more reason. And those celebrated presidential names, borrowed from the slave-owning class! He chuckled to himself, guess it was inevitable he'd turned out politically conservative. Joke's on them.

The three years out at Bolt were even worse than Columbia. "Oreolo" was the label Berkeley leftists used, but, in spite of their censure, he loved provoking the PC cadres. It was a plain fact he was a product of mixed blood, a mutt, a member of Adolf's despised mongrel race. Why people chose to classify that as black or 'African American' he never really understood (he always checked 'Other' for Race on the application forms). Was it something whites had imposed?

Comically, it reminded him of the stories his grandma Grace told about the old Creole society near New Orleans with its rigid caste system. Anyone with more than one thirty-second part African blood was officially classified as black, no matter how pale-faced. 'Quadroons' and 'octoroons' described the various percentages and stratified categories of blood—it all sounded like some bad South Park cartoon. It was even more bizarre today how so many blacks hung tenaciously to their own racial categories. What the hell?—it was big money to be victimized these days. Did admitting the obvious mark him as some kind of traitor?

So, he wasn't sure why Tiger was black and not Asian. And Halle Berry? Wasn't she just as much white as black—in fact, she was a damn sight better than both. No matter, mongrel he was and he wore it with pride. And he wasn't standoffish, as he knew they whispered in the social shadows on campus. Rather, he took pride in refusing to choose his friends by the color of their skin. He was a man of the future, not of the

past, and he'd fight for his right to go his own way. Wasn't that what freedom was all about in this land of the free and home of the brave? It was a strength to break stereotypes.

Besides, in nature, mixed breeds proved to be smarter *and* stronger. And they definitely tended toward the better looking, even if he was being partial. Ms. Berry was his case in point, but how about those stunning women from the Mediterranean melting pot? And the Eurasian connection? Wow. And the perfect example of course: Jaz. Yeah, no home-grown bias there, Jaz was just about the hottest looking woman Dante had ever met. Half Paki, half Brit. Jasmine Winters...he hadn't thought of her for awhile, hell...for at least a week.

He relaxed, still in bed, eyes closed, slowly sinking into his Sunday morning dream ritual that bounced between visions of Jaz and Ms. Berry, when a Miles Davis riff shattered his tranquillity—his Nokia ringtone. He looked at the clock—9:10 am—damn, must be Grace checking in to make sure he was going to church. He felt a pang of guilt.

Grace—she wouldn't let anyone call her Grandma, after all, she said, she was still a young woman when she became a grandmother—was the closest person in the world to him. It was she who had focused all her attention on him as a boy when his own parents were too busy with career demands. He remembered when she came up from Mississippi to live with them after they'd moved to Highland Park. Yes, Grace Boudreaux Jefferson was a real Southerner, a Creole daughter of a Baptist preacher, and correct to the letter. Despite some weak protests from her daughter—his mom—Grace took to schooling him the same way, with a heavy dose of Bible studies. She's the one who instilled in him the desire to honor the Lord by doing good. Though he knew she secretly hoped he'd join the ministry, she was probably the main reason he'd gone into politics rather than the more mercenary professions. He was sure politics was where one could make the biggest difference these days.

Their Sunday call was a weekly ritual, though he always tried to wait until the end of the day, *after* he'd hopefully gone to church. She, on the other hand, didn't seem to care a wit that the political talk shows he watched all aired in the morning. Sunday was the Lord's Day. Thank God for VCRs.

He looked at his caller id: area code 212—New York, not Chicago; Sean, not Grace. A familiar voice barked through the earpiece as he picked up.

“Yo' DP, gitch yo' ass rockin'. Quit spankin' the monkey.”

Sean O'Brien, his best friend and roommate from Columbia. An irrepressible New York Irishman. Instead of calling him DJ like everyone else, DP was Sean's shorthand for Divine Poet, only slightly less annoying

than the white-boy ghetto rap. But Dante retaliated using Sean's initials.

"SOB. Why am I not surprised," he groaned.

"Cause, besides your grandma, I'm the only one who's gonna call you early on the Lord's Day. Wake up, we got business. You alone?"

"Home alone. You?"

"Hamptons. Man, the fall is just beautiful out here, and the talent..." Through the phone his whistle sounded like a cool breeze on a sizzling beach day. "You shoulda been here last night. But that's another conversation. You made plans for the party yet?"

"It's more than three months away."

"Well, you need to get up here early. City's gonna be a zoo, Y2K and all. Who knows what's gonna go down. Besides, there's a few things I need help to prepare. I got the whole damn penthouse and the guest list is up to two hundred—most of them ladies."

Sean had been talking about his Millennium New Year's Party for the past two years. He was going all out, blowing his entire annual bonus. Apparently that's what traders on Wall Street do. Make it, spend it, ...*livin' large*.

Dante began to miss his Sunday morning fantasy as Sean effervesced.

"It's a costume party so you gotta come up with something good. The whole place is gonna be wired with digital satellite. We'll see broadcasts from around the world as the midnight hour passes over the globe. It'll be a trip."

Now Dante knew what he had to look forward to for the next three months. It was going to be impossible for Sean to contain himself. *Livin' large*. The guy was like a little kid with his first drumset, and Dante was the adult trying to sleep in the next room.

Sean dangled the teaser. "And I gotta surprise for you. Remember that girl at Columbia you used to pine and moan over? Yeah, I thought so, Ms. Jasmine Winters. Ran into her recently, said she wouldn't miss it."

Dante's thing for Jaz had never gone away away and Sean knew it. They'd dated a few times at Columbia. He'd gotten really close, but blew it one night in a drunken stupor by professing his undying love. She'd maintained a friendly distance after that debacle, a polite British aloofness. But the more elusive she was, the more he wanted her. After Columbia she'd gotten away, gone on to med school at Johns Hopkins while he spent those painful years out at Berkeley. With the two years he'd spent working up from the bottom of the food chain in D.C., that made five long years since he'd seen her. He'd heard she was heavily involved with some guy, so he tried to sound cool. "Really? So, what's up there?"

“She’s interning at Bellevue, first-year in ER. Seems to like it. And she broke up with that med school dude. I’m sure she’s not involved with anyone.”

Crap. Sean knew how to sink the hook. Now Dante wasn’t going to be able to stop thinking about it either. Three months of distraction with a legislative schedule and committee preps for Sinclair killing him already. Dante was ready to swallow the bait when call-waiting beeped. He looked at the number. Damn, his Chief of Staff.

“Gotta take this. Hold on.”

J.T. Beaumont’s clipped voice jumped across the phone lines to shatter Dante’s last chance for a peaceful Sunday: “Shit hit the fan, Wash. Get your butt down here pronto. I’ll explain later.” Click.

Dante jumped up in one motion as he clicked back to Sean. “Gotta go. Something’s up with Sinclair. Later.”

Then he hit the ground running.