

PROLOGUE

McClain Space Elevator
October 15, 2116

I FEEL SPOILED BY THE SHOW, humbled as countless suns hurl their fire into the night as they did for Zeus, Shiva, Osiris, Quetzalcoatl or even the current set of gods, brightening my retina for an instant before continuing their journey to someone else or something else. I am sitting on the edge of my bed, gazing through the clear bubble keeping me alive, 22,000 miles above Earth at the top of the Space Elevator, owned by the man who owns me—Zinc McClain.

Slavery in America. I refuse to dwell on the darkness as I gaze through this doorway to heaven. To survive, to maintain my sanity, I lock away the bad times, all the evil, the Orwellian nonsense, and focus on what is right, what is possible, what is good and what is now so beguiling before me. Self-pity is pointless and dwelling on adversity can become pathological. Distractions are useful and tonight I focus on my personal star, one I have named *Hope* but astronomers call *Rigel*, the brightest in the constellation *Orion*, the hunter in Greek mythology, with a sword of starlight.

Orwellian is not a term I can use publicly. It doesn't exist. I had never heard of George Orwell's *1984* until two years ago. Yet through the magic and bravery of a small group of librarians at Ogden Academy, I was given a secret copy. "*War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength.*" Big Brother today is really the Twelve Families. And I will never be a Winston Smith, the protagonist. I will never surrender. The irony before me is rich. I am the slave and husband of the most powerful man on earth.

Facts are situational, changing with the needs of the most powerful. Blacks were brought here centuries ago, we are taught, by noble

southern plantation owners anxious to give them better lives and opportunity. And I am not a slave, they insist; I am a poor boy, like many others, generously lifted up into the glittering barronial world.

Slavery didn't just happen, it was building for decades, poor people without hope in a trumpian world; the elite looking for human trophies, the next new novelty to own and flaunt. And I am now one of those, a teenage gewgaw for amusement and status, the first legal slave in America since the Civil War. Such an honor; such a statement about my country and its values. And yet I am one of the lucky ones.

Somehow I don't see myself as a trophy, particularly right out of bed, but the media and fans dwell on my physique, my face, which some find handsome, and long blond hair, all unusual in a black and brown world. It hit hyper-drive after I was named America's top male gymnast last year with a lock on making the 2116 Olympics team. Celebrity can make people see you as more than you are, demand more than you can reasonably give. Downers believe I am a hero, the first of our class to beat the elite, more than just a famous athlete. I didn't ask for this, but I cannot simply turn away because I feel overwhelmed.

I was embarrassed at first, now I just smile and wave. I had thought the US title might be helpful to my family but it just got me noticed, tagged as a potential souvenir, then kidnapped and sold. So much for the Constitution. But I will do more than survive.

A year ago, when I was sixteen, Zinc and I were students at San Francisco's Ogden Academy, the nation's most elite high school; me, a sophomore charity boy, him, a senior and grandson of the founder, Barron Ogden, a man so rich and powerful his first name came to define his social class, barronials.

They say—*they* meaning those with power, the barronials—they say Americans, all of us, live in a libertarian paradise where everyone has the freedom to pursue their dreams, even if it means crushing the dreams of others, people like me and my social class. If you don't succeed you just aren't aggressive enough or ruthless enough, or you care too much about others, or you're lazy. Of course, being born rich helps. Being born poor, not so much.

Zinc McClain. He is the eldest son of the first of the Twelve

Families that own and control just about everything. He is taller than me, lithe, a crooked nose as if smashed in a fight, mottled dark skin that made me want to explore, lips that formed an angry leave-me-alone snarl—an odd set of imperfections. Most kids thought he was ugly and his personality was dark, dangerous and brooding. In a world where anyone could be beautiful, fitting a certain popular standard, he was different, in part because his dad wouldn't let him change and now, a year later, because I like him this way. Intentionally imperfect. And that makes people notice him, take a second look, makes them wonder about a man strong enough to disregard popular tastes. Just like his dad intended.

Rumors said Zinc could be vicious like his asshole younger brother, Connor. But it was just a façade, a shield to hide his insecurities. At school, invisibility had been my strategy and we barely knew each other. But it didn't work. Zinc came to my school Music Department recitals and gymnastic meets; actually, he seemed to be dragged there by his best friend Sonia Washington. He often stared at me with an expression like he was sucking a lemon. I found it unnerving. Then there was my kidnapping and his birthday party. The sympathetic family doctor had me on tranquilizers and Zinc had looked stupefied when guards pulled me before him. He seemed scared. I certainly was.

Now here I am sitting in my boxer shorts on the edge of my bed, his bed, really, and I am the husband-slave-lover-best friend. Sweet. It's so peaceful up here above the earth if you discount the humans. Looking into the Milky Way, squinting, I notice Hope is flaming extra bright this night, helping me find calm in the chaos. I keep thinking my life can't get more complicated, more exciting or dangerous and I'm always wrong. Segmenting my brain is essential, compacting the bad to accommodate the good, to leave enough room so I can observe, dream, star gaze and love. And sometimes plot.

I never paid much attention to the U.S. Supreme Court until it legalized a version of debt-bond slavery. It certainly made me appreciate the importance of politics, that evil can conquer when you don't pay attention, are not allowed to take part or are too lazy and distracted.

On my first night as Zinc's slave, he said no matter what I thought of him, he had pride and a sense of honor. He'd never force me to do

anything, sexual or otherwise. As reassuring as that was, it might limit my value to the teenager who now controlled my life. I am a romantic at heart but also practical. Survival ranks high on my list. And protecting my friends and family. I enjoy sex, a natural human function, and am not timid about a little seduction if it helps my goals. Pragmatism often trumps idealism. And religion doesn't dwell on sex like it did a century ago, damning those who were different, who were queer. Textbooks say people actually ran political campaigns against homosexuals and bisexuals or those even more fluid. What were they thinking back then?

When I read about the past, about sports, the kinds that drew huge followings, it seems strange today that gymnastics, particularly male gymnastics, upgraded with new elements, more flash and hype, should become an obsession. But it is, perfect male bodies on guiltless display, the power of muscle in an age of technology. And I am the reigning king.

Even though Zinc had all the power, he was bashful at first, insecure about sex and convinced his face made him ugly, that he was unlovable. Actually, I discovered he was a total innocent hiding behind a nasty façade, a byproduct of his dysfunctional family. The vanity of the elite! The richest teenager on the planet was nervous about having sex with one of the poorest. One wrong step and he could have had me killed or whatever he wanted, such was the staggering power of a downer slave. But it was a romantic, almost magical, first love for him and it opened my heart. Over the months we grew close. He treated me well, a confidant, friend and lover. He never put me down and, together, we rose higher, two lovers bound as one.

We grew so close that his mother, Glenda, vain queen of phantasmagorical cinema, saw me as a rival for control of her eldest child. She hated me, even though she was the one who bought me, called me a plaything to be used and discarded, more useful and amusing than another diamond belt buckle. She even had a tracker bolted to my ear. Her other son, Connor, my classmate, was a thug who thrived on beating up downer boys with the help of his comrades. After Zinc's father had died, Glenda and Connor were convinced he was shoving them aside for me and needed to act.

In thinking about all this, it was complicated and I could understand her fear. Because of the primogeniture laws passed a generation back, designed to compound family wealth, and under the religious conservative rollback on women's rights, Zinc inherited everything, sole master of McClain Enterprises, a quadrillionaire, give or take a few hundred billion. They had only what he gave them. Our relationship became a threat.

So they conspired, fabricated proof, lied to Zinc, played on his insecurities, his mental exhaustion and depression after the assassination of his dad as he tried to manage the overwhelming new responsibility of running the family fortune. It got ugly, he had a breakdown and rejected me, threw me out. I had to escape. His best friend Sonia Washington flew me to Vancouver for the 2116 Olympics, a vagabond slave and member of the US gymnastics team. I turned seventeen there, alone, despondent, scared and unsure of my future. Days before our event, I was attacked by religious terrorists who invaded the Olympic Village and he saved me. My Zinc. Three days later I won seven gold medals while he watched, sitting with my parents and siblings.

Zinc and Spartak, I love the sound. We're good together.

And yet...is it real? I went from talented teenage peasant to a plaything for a teenage plutocrat. Captured, sold and delivered. I have been reading about Stockholm Syndrome, where the prisoner starts to identify with his captors. Is that what this "love" is? It seems genuine. I had to seduce him. Was it scripted? No, it had to be authentic. And yet...did I really love him or was I just grateful not to be in a jail cell or forced into sexual slavery and my brain tricked me into thinking it was love? Rape is a crime of power and I have been raped. But not by him. And I was purchased as a squeezable knickknack for Zinc by his mother. She thought it was funny. But he called it unconscionable. A good man despite his twisted family and social class. And that gave me reason to hope for myself and my people.

And just days ago, as a VIP crowd celebrated the opening of the Space Elevator, including the President of the United States, key members of Congress, the governor of California, my family and friends, on a gondola far above the earth—he asked me to marry him, down on one knee, tears in his eyes, and I said *YES*, crying like a baby, and

all of us with a view of heaven and earth afforded heretofore only to astronauts and gods. President Ali Chiu officiated.

A slave for a year; husband for just hours. Being both is a bit non-traditional—hell, it's just plain awkward—no headaches allowed—and a little kinky. Actually, I like kinky as long as its consensual, and never have a headache.

Most surprising and important, in our year together before the marriage, I came to love him. And he loves me. At least I hope it's real. Sometimes I wish I was less special as people say, less athletic, less good looking, less musical. Life might be easier. Likely, I would be free. I feel like a male peacock fretting about his tail, wishing it was less colorful. Am I egotistical? I don't believe the hype but the media conjures me into an object of desire and downers see me as their champion. So, I go with it.

I'd like my freedom and he said he wants to grant it. But not yet. The Supreme Court decision had no provision for a slave to regain his freedom.

So, for now I'm husband and slave.

The world is a mess, a bit like my life. The war between the Twelve Families isn't over and it's been vicious. Zinc destroyed the fortune of the family that murdered his father. For the elite, there is no such thing as law and justice; they make their own.

Even worse are the Dominionists. These fundamentalist Christian radicals had infiltrated and seized most denominations, a great religion twisting even further from what its founder preached about helping the poor and sick, and now all about bureaucracy, money and power. They raised an army to take control of government, convinced environmental catastrophes presaged the *End Times*.

I killed many Jesusistas, their combat warriors, when they tried to assassinate Zinc and I, screaming that I was too popular, a distraction for downers from Jesus, the *End Times* and their scheme to take over the world. Delusional; maybe it's the wine. Or, just *jihadis* in Christian clerical collars. Ethereal faces float through my brain, the dead won't leave me. I lock them up for now.

And perhaps strangest and most heartening of all, there is a resurgent liberal underground fighting to restore democracy. And they've

made me their poster boy, a symbol, all a bit awkward for a barronial slave. But Zinc is fine with it. Nocturne is the name the underground uses for all their messaging and hacks.

I've been told—secretly—that my white boy demographic is important in building support for the revolution, since the white minority are sure votes for the political puppets who support the barronial agenda. I have been labeled *Freedom's Hope*. It scared me when I first heard the term. I'm only seventeen. Does the return of democracy rest on my shoulders? I've seen this hunger on the faces of downer kids and adults in stadiums and on the streets, that I am more than a teenager. For them, I need to be.

I'm convinced Sonia and her uncle, Justice William O. Washington, are involved in Nocturne, perhaps secretly leading it, but don't have proof. Even if I did, I wouldn't tell anyone. I want Nocturne to win. Justice Washington was powerful in his opposition to slavery when the Supreme Court voted. I think of him as a black Moses with white dreadlocks. And Sonia is a black warrior princess. She laughed when I called her that and kissed my cheek. She is one of my best friends and promoters which seems to help Nocturne. Odd how that works.

And last night it got worse.

In a private meeting room, President Chiu and a hired assassin, Kinuba Steele, tried to murder Zinc, Ransom Bolt, the security chief, and myself. *"I'm sick of the Twelve telling me what to do!"* she had seethed, and bragged about arranging the assassination of Zinc's dad, the man who made her president. All her threats and confessions were captured on a hidden security lumin that she didn't know was there, an oversight in her reading of the Platform schematics. Never assume you're not being watched or sniffed. Kinuba had shot her, figuring the President intended to kill her too.

The world is mad. And a little amnesia can be helpful at times.

With a few minutes of quiet time while Zinc is at a meeting, I clear my head, think about the nature of love, my own sanity, my family, my husband, and watch the Milky Way, more brilliant than on earth, almost tactile, and there is my star of hope, Rigel, beckoning while I sit alone in this temple of Apollo.

For an instant, I feel like a god myself.