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THE BLACKGAARD CHRONICLES™



BOOK EIGHT

DARK KING DOMINATES



PHIL LOLLAR

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The Blackgaard Chronicles: *Dark King Dominates*

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CHAPTER ONE



Mayor Tom Riley's footsteps echoed through the columned entry of Odyssey Town Hall and continued to reverberate throughout the building as he made his way to his office. His gait was quicker and peppier than usual, and he whistled a happy tune as he walked.

He wasn't sure why he was in such a good mood, especially considering the recent vandalism going on around town, the fact that a kid he used to see at Whit's End had been beaten up, and the news that Jack Allen had resigned from the ice cream and discovery

emporium. Somehow he felt optimistic that things would turn out all right.

His mayoral campaign had, after all—despite operatives from the state’s environmental agency trying to shut down his farm and candidacy by dumping chemicals into his water while pretending to monitor its cleanup. Combine that with former mayor Bill Jenkins’s abrupt and mysterious resignation and the notorious and always contentious Bart Rathbone jumping into the race, and it had been an uphill battle, to be certain.

Tom felt sure that that snake in the grass Philip Glossman had been behind it all—same as when he had tried to build a state highway through the farm—but Glossman had predictably denied all knowledge of the agents’ actions. *Did I say ‘snake’? ‘Eel’ would be more like it. Glossman is certainly as slippery as one.*

No matter. God had worked it all out for good in the end. Bernard Walton had done yeoman’s work as his campaign manager. The phony chemical-spill plan had been foiled by the timely delivery of a video taken by Sam Johnson and Eugene Meltsner of the two agents admitting their pretense while in the act of pouring

chemicals into his stream. Public opinion had soared for Tom over his opponent, and the voters had swept him into office. Justice.

As Tom entered his office suite, his secretary, Penny, rose from her desk in her outer office. “Good morning, Penny!” Tom said cheerily.

Penny circumnavigated her desk skillfully, clipboard and the day’s mail in hand. “Good morning, Mayor Riley,” she responded briskly, her attitude all business. She handed him the mail.

“What’s on the to-do list today?” he asked as he flipped through the well-sorted envelopes, which consisted of mailers, missives, and requests for favors.

Penny consulted her schedule. “You have a 9:30 a.m. brunch with the Odyssey Women’s Club, a 10:15 a.m. brunch with the Odyssey Youth Council, an 11 a.m. brunch with the Odyssey Historical Society, and a noon lunch at the Chamber of Commerce.”

Tom put a hand on his small potbelly and drawled, “Good night! If I keep goin’ to all these brunches and lunches, I’m gonna lose my girlish figure!”

Penny blinked at him. “Sir?”

“Just a joke, Penny.”

She pursed her lips and returned to her clipboard. “Of course, sir. After lunch, you’ll meet with the city council from one ’til three, and then you’re scheduled to speak to the Farmers’ Bureau sometime after four.”

“Sounds like a busy day! Anything else?”

“Yes, sir. Dale Jacobs is waiting in your office.”

Tom looked up from the mail. “Dale?”

“Yes, sir, from *The Odyssey Times*.”

He lowered his voice. “I know who he is, Penny. I’ve been friends with him for years. What does he want?”

Penny also lowered her voice. “He wouldn’t say. But he did make it clear that he’s not here for an interview.”

“I see,” Tom replied thoughtfully. “Well, I guess I’d better not keep him waitin’ then. Hold my calls, Penny.”

“Yes, sir.”

Tom moved to his office door and opened it. Sure enough, Dale sat in one of the chairs in front of his desk, jotting notes on a small pad. When he heard the door open, he rose from his chair. “Hello, Mr. Mayor,” he said.

Tom waved him down as he moved around his desk to his own executive chair. “No, no, Dale, don’t get up.

Penny told me you were in here.” He plopped down in the chair. “What’s up?”

Dale sank awkwardly back into his chair and took a deep breath. “Well . . . there’s really no easy way to do this, so I guess I should get right to the point. I’m sure you recognize this?” He took several pages from a folder he had stuffed between his chair’s cushion and armrest and handed them to Tom, who scanned them.

“Yeah. It’s a list of people and companies who contributed money to my campaign for mayor.”

“Do you know everyone on this list?”

“Not everyone. It’s a big list, Dale.”

Dale leaned forward. “Do you know . . . this one, right here?” He pointed to a name two-thirds of the way down the page.

“The RBG Foundation,” Tom read aloud. “Oh yeah! If I remember right, it’s an organization that contributes money to political campaigns. They gave money to me and to Bart Rathbone. At least, that’s what Bernard Walton told me. As my campaign manager, all that went through him.”

Dale nodded solemnly. “I see.”

Tom's brow furrowed. "We released all this information to the press during the campaign, Dale. It all checks out."

"Not all of it."

"What do you mean?"

Dale opened the folder again and retrieved another piece of paper. "I was working late in my office two nights ago when someone slid this under my door."

He handed it to Tom, who again read aloud. "Check out RBG contributions to Riley campaign." He looked back at Dale and shrugged. "So?"

Dale leaned back into his chair uneasily. "So . . . we checked them out. Tom, the RBG Foundation owns Edgebiter Chemical Company."

Tom's jaw dropped. "What!"

"Then you didn't know?"

"Of course I didn't know! We never would have taken money from them if I had!" He rose from his chair, took the list in one hand and the note in the other, and stared intently at them both.

Dale nodded. "That's what I thought, which is why I'm here unofficially. But you realize this makes you look like you were bought off by Edgebiter."

Tom moved around his desk and began to pace back and forth behind Dale's chair. "But what about all the evidence? The videotape of the two guys from the Environmental Detection Agency who admitted they were planting chemicals on my farm? And the test Eugene ran that showed it was clean?"

"Well, I hate to say it, Tom, but all that could have been faked by Edgebiter."

Tom stopped in his tracks. "Faked?"

"I didn't say it was. But it isn't outside the realm of possibility. At least, that's what the voters might think."

"Now, wait a minute," Tom said. He sat down in the chair next to Dale's that matched it. "I just told you that the RBG Foundation contributed to Bart's campaign too! Why would they try to buy both of us off?"

Dale sighed heavily. "Tom, there's no evidence that RBG gave Bart anything."

Tom's eyes widened. "What?"

"We checked his records. But it really doesn't make any difference. Bart didn't win—you did. And that's all that matters to the public."

Tom leaned back in the chair. “Does that mean you’re gonna print this in the *Times*?”

Dale shook his head. “No. Not until we have something more substantial. But that’s why I came here, to tell you we’re looking . . . and that, most likely, we’re not the only media outlet that has this information.”

Tom bolted upright again. “Oh no! You mean whoever gave this note to you may have also given it to—”



“This is Odyssey 105, *The Cryin’ Bryan Dern Show*! And I say it’s outrageous—outrageous!—that the mayor of our town, the man we voted into office because of his so-called integrity, may be guilty of buying the election with funds from big business! With me is former mayoral candidate Bart Rathbone. Bart, what’s your take on this?”

Bart shifted in his chair. The gaudily decorated studio, filled with neon signs, strange posters, and life-size cardboard-backed representations of shock jock Cryin’ Bryan Dern, distracted him. He blinked but then realized Dern was waiting for an answer. “My take? Hey, I didn’t take anything! It was Riley that did the takin’!”

“No, no, Bart. I meant what do you think about all this?”

“What do I think? Whadda youse think I think? I think it’s terrible, that’s what I think! What do I think . . .”

Dern rolled his eyes. “Right . . . and well said.”

“I mean, if this isn’t proof positive that Riley isn’t fit to serve as mayor, then I’m a monkey’s uncle!”

“Again, well said,” Dern replied sarcastically. “Especially the monkey part.”

“Yeah!” Bart grinned smugly.

“But when we phoned city hall,” the jock went on, “Riley said he didn’t know anything about it. Don’t you believe him?”

“Course I don’t believe him! And even if I did, it wouldn’t matter, ’cause what I believe don’t make him innocent or guilty.” Bart leaned in closer to the microphone. “What makes him innocent or guilty is the evidence. And I think we all agree the evidence is clear!”

“Meaning?”

“Meanin’ he’s guilty! Weren’tcha listenin’?”

Dern smirked. “Uh . . . yeah. So what do you think should happen?”

“Riley should come clean and fess up! Admit he did it—then resign!”

“But let’s be realistic for a moment,” Dern countered. “Do you really think he’ll resign?”

Bart slapped the table in front of him. “If he don’t, then we should make him!”

“So you’re talking recall?”

Bart’s brow furrowed. “No, I’m talkin’ about kickin’ Riley outta office! You ain’t listenin’, are you?”

Dern sighed and rolled his eyes again. “Uh, thank you, Bart Rathbone. Well, Odyssey, you’ve heard our opinions. Now it’s up to you. What’ll it be, resignation or recall? The phone lines are open. Call now!”



That night, Tom sat quietly in his office, deep in thought. The lyric of an old song kept playing in his mind: “What a difference a day makes . . .” He barely noticed when Penny walked in.

“Mayor Riley?” she said softly.

“Hmm? Oh, uh, yes, Penny, what is it?”

“It’s late.”

Tom glanced at the clock on his desk. 8:30 p.m. She was right. “I’m sorry, Penny. You go on home.”

“Actually, I wasn’t really concerned about me. Can I get you anything?”

Tom gave her a pained smile. “Not unless you can replace this day.”

Penny returned the smile. “I’m good, sir, but not that good.” She sighed heavily. “I’m so sorry, Mr. Riley.”

“It’s all right, Penny. You go on home. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir,” she said sadly. “Good night.” She moved to the door, glanced back at him with concerned eyes, and then left, closing the door behind her.

Tom sat, lost in thought again. After a few moments, he realized he was looking at the photos on his desk—pictures of his first wife and son and of his second wife, Agnes. Looking at them made him feel even more alone. His first wife and son were gone, and while Agnes was still in the land of the living, her mental illness kept her mostly confined to Hillingdale Haven, a facility providing twenty-four-hour care.

He missed them all terribly, though he was glad they

weren't there to see what was happening at present. As he studied their features, his eyes came to rest on the cross Agnes always wore. He suddenly remembered the one thing he had forgotten to do in all this turmoil and felt an immediate sense of shame. Claspng his hands and bowing his head, he turned to his only source of true comfort.

“Lord, forgive me for not talking to You before this. Thank You for Your love and Your peace. I know You have a plan in all this, and if You don't want to show it to me, that's okay. But I sure wish You would.”

Just then, there was a knock on the door. He huffed at being interrupted and barked, “Penny, I said it's all right. Go on home—”

But the door opened, and there, to Tom's utter amazement, stood the last person on earth he expected to see, who grinned and said, “She did.”

Tom stared, eyes wide and mouth agape. “I don't believe it!”

“Hiya, Mr. Riley. Or should I say Mayor Riley?”

“Richard Maxwell!”

The younger man stepped into the room. “Surprise!”

Tom rose from his chair and jabbed a finger at the younger man. “I shoulda known! Whenever there’s trouble in Odyssey, you’re never very far away.”

Richard shrugged and said lightly, “There’s nothing like having a reputation.”

“Yeah, well, I want you and your reputation out of here! Or maybe I should call your parole officer—”

Richard held up his hands. “Mr. Riley, wait. I know I’m not your favorite person in the world, but please listen to what I have to say! Please!”

Tom took a deep breath. “All right, I’m listenin’.”

Richard lowered his hands and took another step forward. “I’ve been keeping an eye on Odyssey for the past few months, and—”

Tom cut in, “You’ve been livin’ here for a couple of months?”

“No,” Richard said, shaking his head. “I’ve been . . . observing from a distance.”

Tom’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“Call it a hobby. Anyway, I’ve been following what’s going on here, and I have my suspicions about who’s behind it all.”

“Now that you’re back in town, I think I know who’s behind it all.”

Richard sighed. “Mr. Riley—”

Tom cut him off again. “You tried this before, pretendin’ you’re concerned about everyone and tryin’ to get back in their good graces. You may have fooled them, but not me. What are you really up to, Maxwell? Why are you here?”

“To warn you.”

“Warn—or threaten?”

“Warn!” Richard said urgently. “You need to be careful, Mr. Riley. Very careful. I think something big is going on. And as soon as I have evidence to prove it, I’ll—”

Tom jumped in one last time. “Uh-huh, well, I thank you for the advice. And now, I’ll thank you to leave.”

The two men stared at each other, Tom resolute, Richard grinding his jaw. At last Richard’s face relaxed, and he muttered, “Yeah, sure.” He stepped to the door, then turned and grinned again. “See ya around, Mayor Riley.”

Tom heard his footsteps echo down the hall and out the main entrance.