

Lancer

a novel by Elliot S! Maggin

Chapter 1

Anthem

As the plane landed on the last day of his life the President woke up thinking about fate. For a moment he tried to catch hold of a dream. It was something that involved riding horses and wearing a helmet, and the air smelled like ocean. He could snatch little images from his nap as the day seeped in, but his dreams that had significant themes – destiny, death, history, the infinite – were always blue-green and smelled like the South Pacific. He concerned himself less with the content of these dreams than with the fact that he was having them at all. He had a big country to run; there was no time for philosophy.

The President hadn't thought much about fate during his waking hours since he was a boy. In those days, lying in a sickbed during his sophomore year of high school, or in a hospital during the year that he should have spent as a freshman at Princeton, he read Beowulf and the Iliad and Idylls of the King and he thought about what kinds of people make history and why. He wondered whether he ever would.

“We touch down in two minutes, sir,” the voice in his ear said, and the President lost whatever was left of the dream.

“Any coffee?” the President asked the voice and pried open his eyes. And from somewhere – maybe from the faded dream – his mind heard a phrase: “Always, there have been the heroes.”



The city was a hive of sound and story today. Everyone had something to do and was intent on doing it. Drivers scurried to get around or through streets that would be blocked later on. Shop owners hung out flags. Teachers, trailed by serpentine files of children, breezed crisply along Main and Elm before settling where each judged to have the best view. Everyone was busy at something. You don’t get to see a President very often, Davy Sugarman told himself as his social studies teacher brought the class to a stop at the corner of a little park that rolled down to the sidewalk and emptied onto Elm where the President’s car, according to today’s paper, would roll right by.

“Got binoculars?” Vinnie Woodbury wanted to know, and he reached in a pocket to pull out a little green case that looked like a wallet.

“Binoculars?”

“Yeah, here.” Vinnie’s wallet was actually a snap-open container made of some stiff material. He popped it open like a woman’s change purse and a pair of lenses folded down over the opening, with another smaller pair on the opposite side. “See?” he said and handed Davy the pocket binoculars.

Davy looked through the small end and saw some people milling around in a building down the block where the road jagged away from Commerce Street and emptied

out east of North Houston. They worked, Davy supposed. “What do you need binoculars for? He’s coming right by here.”

“He’s coming from all the way down there,” Vinnie said, “and he’s going all the way up there. I don’t want to miss anything.”

“Neither do I,” Davy said, “and I won’t.”

Somebody had a radio. It was one of those hand-held transistor types that you had to press against your ear to hear anything. The guy with the radio was a tall skinny kid with acne and a baseball cap who looked like every greasy type who walked around with these radios through Davy’s early childhood. Invariably the guys who turned up looking for Maryann, the teenage girl whose family rented the apartment upstairs from his parents, would be pressing radios to their ears when they came into the vestibule to ring the bell. Davy would hover beside the stairway waiting for these big kids to pass before he ventured out of the building. But this kid in the crowd waiting for the President was nowhere near as dangerous and hormone-addled as those guys.

“Secret Service says Lancer’s landed,” the kid with the transistor radio hollered with a jubilation Davy could not imagine infecting any of Maryann’s swains with the slicked-back hair and the attitudes.

“What’s that mean?” Davy asked the kid.

“It’s what the news guys said,” the radio kid explained. “The Secret Service code name for the President is Lancer.”

“Why do they have a code name? Why isn’t he just the President or —”

“So the Russians don’t know where he is, doofus,” Vinnie told Davy.

“Well if the reporter knows the code name, don’t you think the Russians do too?”

Davy’s argument was compelling.

“When did they land?” another of the eighth-graders in Davy’s class asked the kid with the radio.

“Just now,” was the answer, still excited.

“Wow,” Davy thought. For all he knew, he could have said it out loud.



The President used his big arms to push himself to his feet and reached across the aisle for the walking stick that leaned against the seat there. The President’s mother had brought the cane back for him from a trip to Macao. It was of ebony and ivory. She had bargained with a street merchant to lower the price from about four to two-and-a-half dollars. The main shaft and the handle of the cane were black, but a length of it just under the handle was an ivory carving of two storks. One stork stood on the ground in front of an elaborate building that looked like it might be a temple. The other stork perched on one of the building’s eaves. To the Chinese, his mother explained, a pair of storks signifies eternal life. It was a beautiful cane. It was a shame that no one but the people closest to the President ever got to see it.

He was one of the youngest men ever to become President, and it was reputedly his youth and apparent vitality that distinguished him before the voters from the many other candidates whom he ran against. Indeed, considering the dilapidated condition of his back, he was rather quick to recover from a nap in an awkward position. By the time he got to the last seat in the cabin and out to the exit deck he could set the cane aside and

strut down the stairs with his shoulders back and his head up the way the world expected a young man to move.

Already the First Lady was almost at the bottom of the stairs. She would stand there for a minute or two, looking back at him, smiling. Then, when the President caught up to his wife, the contingent of women from the local chapter of somethingorother would walk onto the carpet that extended from the stairs and put an enormous bouquet of longstem red roses into the First Lady's arms. The President would shake their hands. She would thank them and smile. Then they would walk together to the long black Lincoln convertible that waited for them at the end of the carpet. This was a ballet and the two of them specialized in it. They did not even have to rehearse it any more.

A few moments after the President and the First Lady settled in the back seat of the car, the governor and his wife got in next to the driver and they were off across the tarmac. Motorcycles roared after them and a pair of them carrying uniformed police took their places to either side of the President's convertible. By the time the car was on the back road leading out of the airport and toward downtown, six other cars filled with various reporters, senators, party officials, vice presidents and potentates and all of their drivers and protectors had all fallen into line.

"Nice to see you, governor, Nellie," the President said. "Wake me up when it's time to start waving."



Davy's social studies teacher Mrs. McKenna had found a nice spot for the class to stand at the bottom of Elm Street. The crowd here was light because this was a part of the President's route that jagged off Main Street where most of the people with their

streamers and bunting were. In an open lot behind Davy's class there was nothing but grass where the kids could sit around and soak up the sun while they waited. Across the street was a big open plaza too. You could see up the block where the President's car would turn onto Elm to come down this way toward the highway. Mrs. McKenna had noticed this spot on a map in yesterday's paper. In the map in last week's newspaper the route went right down Main Street, but this little hiccup in the course must have been added later. She thought it would be less crowded here and she was right.

"Is that the one with the zoom?" Davy asked. "The Bell and Howell?"

"Huh?" the little bald man on the concrete pedestal at the back of the big lawn said.

"That's the Bell and Howell camera, right? My dad's got the one without the zoom. I wanted him to get the one with the zoom, that one you've got, but he said it cost too much."

The man looked down at Davy, grinned. "She made me go home and get it. This one, who's letting me teeter here like a bird on a wire."

The little bald man in the bow tie indicated the young woman who stood behind the pedestal. "Sorry," the woman said. "I needed to straighten my shoe."

"Yeah, and I needed to fall off this thing and break my neck," the bald man said as with the young woman's help he stepped down from the concrete pillar.

"My mom can't even look when my dad does stuff like that."

"Stuff like what?" the woman wanted to know.

"Hang out over high fences, slow down in the car and hold up traffic, lean over the Grand Canyon to take a picture. Stuff like that," Davy said.

“Your father the daredevil,” the man said, buttoning up his blazer. “My wife would throttle me if she saw me on this thing. This is my secretary.”

Davy was a polite southern boy. He nodded and smiled at the secretary but talked only to the man with the bow tie. “My dad’s a roofer,” Davy said, “so I guess he’s a daredevil.”

“My dad was a velvet cutter with a very long pair of scissors,” the bow tie man said, “so I guess he was a daredevil too. I make phone calls and try to sell things. Much less dangerous. Except on days when the President comes by and my assistant makes me run home and get my camera and I have to climb on walls. What do you do for a living, young man?”

Davy thought about the question a moment. “I’m a kid,” Davy said.

“I used to be a kid,” man with the bow tie said, “but I gave it up. Too much trouble.”

A swelling sound rose from a few blocks away, like a cheer from a stadium far off. Davy could also hear revving engines, the sound of approaching Harleys.

“That’s my cue,” the little man said, pushing down on his secretary’s hand and unfolding his way up to the platform again. “Go see,” he said. “Go see.”

Davy was off at a dead run across the lawn, toward Elm Street and the others in his class, to stand at the curb and watch the police bikes roar out from around the corner a block away.



“So how are you doing, sir?” the governor in the front seat wanted to know.

“Excuse me?” the President in the back seat asked him.

“What’d you say, Mr. President?” the governor asked.

“He said he’s fine,” the governor’s wife said.

“What did he find?” the President asked the governor’s wife, who didn’t hear the question.

The First Lady was the only one in the car – other than Roy and Bill the two taciturn Secret Service agents in the front seat – who wasn’t hollering at someone. She just looked out at the crowd smiling, moving her head slowly, as though catching direct eye contact from each person they saw on the street. She was extraordinarily good at this, and she was the only one here who realized that was all she needed to do. The wind and the cheers and the rumbling of engines were too loud to let them do anything else. The President sat to her right and she was looking out the left side of the car. He took her right hand and put a light kiss on her fingertips. He supposed nobody but she noticed what he had done. She squeezed his hand just a little before he let her go.

These had been a rough few years for the two of them. You don’t get to be President, he knew, without being seriously self-interested. He also knew that you don’t grow up to be one of the most beautiful women on the planet – and from any objective perspective his wife was that, and would have been no matter whom she married – without lots and lots of people telling you that you are the center of the Universe. Extreme egoism at both poles of the same household is a difficult management exercise. It involves indulgent children, a satisfying working environment and a great many servants and sycophants. When the President’s mother continually told him he ought to be thankful because he was blessed, he knew she was right but he wondered if she knew what she was referring to.

The motorcycles and the Secret Service car in front had turned to the right and the two police escort bikes were dropping back a little from the sides of the President's car. It looked like people on the street onto which they were turning were a little sparser. There was a park. Maybe for a block or two he could have some actual personal interaction, such as it was.



The first car was just a white sedan with no one Davy recognized in it. Then there were police on motorcycles. Then there was this big black convertible with flags on the hood flapping with the wind. It was the President's car, Davy was sure.

Davy had no idea that this president was a new kind of national leader. Davy was thirteen and the President was in his mid-forties, and no matter how young an adult is, he is going to seem ancient to a thirteen-year-old. Add to that adult's cachet a measure of authority greater than that of the boy's father, and the gulf between the child and the adult becomes inaccessible. Still, this man was a figure who presided over a rare alteration in the country's essential nature. He was the first world leader of a generation who had weathered the economic and political dislocation of the early Twentieth Century. He and his contemporaries fought in the most entangling war the world had yet borne, and he served with distinction. He was the first to formulate and express the idea that, rather than allow inexorable cycles of prosperity and scarcity to roll through a community like tides, it was possible to use a community's prosperity to ameliorate poverty, to put institutions and reserves in place to make shallow and even eliminate the next cycle of scarcity. This was not an entirely new idea; it came to Joseph in a dream three thousand years earlier. But the President was the first to suggest that here, in the most productive economic

engine in history, you could forego an opportunity to rake away the profits of that productivity and invest it instead in the prospect of even greater success in the future. The mere implication of these notions made the President into a wildly popular figure, on the order of a star of popular culture.

Davy was a bright boy, but he understood none of this. He understood only that this was a person whose position in the community made him happy. Sometimes the community was the world stage. Sometimes it was the country. Today, as it happened, the community was Davy's home town and here was the President rolling down the street.

Davy also did not wholly understand that this made the President a very dangerous person from the point of view of those accustomed to taking their profits when these profits became available.

Davy ran up the edge of the street in the direction of the oncoming limousine, and suddenly there was nothing in his way. It seemed the cars were slowing down a little. The motorcycles had rolled up ahead or hung behind the President's car. A man who had been riding the running board alongside the car behind was now on the street and running behind the President's slow-moving car. In the back seat were the President and the First Lady, and it seemed for all the world to Davy that the both of them were glowing. There was nothing in the world as bright as the two of them.

Davy ran right up beside the grinning President's car and reached out his hand and the President reached back. Davy grasped his big hand hard. It was rougher than he thought it would be, hard like his father's hand. Davy wanted to run alongside the car, holding onto the President's hand for as long as he could.

He took a couple of running steps, holding on, and then something really weird happened.



For a moment the world froze in place. The car stopped rolling. The boy hung by the side in mid-stride. Birds hung suspended in the sky. The flags on the hood of the car stopped flapping, but stopped in awkward positions, partly furled, partly folded. Dust stopped drifting and clouds stopped scudding. The place where the hands of the boy and the man touched felt flat and raw. The smiles on both their faces fixed in place. Then everything around but the two of them began to melt away.

Melt. Away.

For the President and for Davy Sugarman the rest of the world went soft, then it began to fade. And when the faded places were gone there was something like white, but it was mostly nothing. Just nothing, and then both the man and the boy, touching hands, lost sensation altogether.