

CHAPTER 5

than an hour before Iowans gathered to make their choices. The school was packed, the hallways jammed with people trying to find their precinct rooms, friends and neighbors greeting each other, children in tow looking bewildered or bored, volunteers for various campaigns handing out last-minute literature. The energy was palpable, a mix of excitement and nervous anticipation.

Inside the designated room for one of the precinct caucuses, I was struck by the sheer ordinariness of the setting for such a consequential event. Folding chairs had been set up in rows, a small table at the front for the precinct captain and volunteers. No high-tech polling machines or voting booths—just neighbors ready to stand up for their candidate, literally, in a public display of democracy.

The process began with a brief explanation of the rules. Participants would have a chance to make their case for their preferred candidate and then, at the appointed time, gather into groups according to their choice. Those candidates not receiving at least 15% support in the initial alignment would be considered non-viable, and their supporters would have the opportunity to realign with their second choice.

As the caucus got underway, I watched our organizers at work, calmly answering questions, guiding first-timers through the process, their confidence and preparedness a testament to the months of groundwork laid across the state. When it came time for the initial alignment, I held my breath, hoping that our emphasis on hope and change, on a different kind of politics, had resonated.

The room shifted and sorted itself into clusters, the air filled with a polite but determined buzz. When the numbers were tallied, it was clear: we had achieved viability in this precinct—a small but significant victory replicated in many others across the state that night.

After the final realignment, our group had not only held but grown, supporters of non-viable candidates having been persuaded to join us, moved by the arguments of their friends and neighbors or perhaps by the spirit of what our campaign represented. I thanked everyone for their participation, regardless of whom they supported, grateful for this unique expression of civic engagement.

By the time Michelle and I, along with Plouffe, Valerie, Reggie, and Marvin, made it back to our headquarters, early results were coming in. We gathered around televisions, laptops open, tracking returns precinct by precinct, the mood oscillating between cautious optimism and nerve-wracking tension.

And then, finally, the call: We had won Iowa. The staff erupted in cheers, hugs shared all around, tears of joy and relief mingling with disbelief. This victory, against all odds, against the machinery of more seasoned opponents, seemed to vindicate every hope, every sacrifice, every mile traveled and door knocked. It was more than a political win; it felt like a personal affirmation for everyone involved—a reaffirmation that, despite its flaws, America was capable of coming together, of choosing unity and progress.

The road ahead would be long, the campaign trail stretching out with pitfalls and challenges we couldn't yet imagine. But on that cold January night in Iowa, surrounded by what had become an extended family, I allowed myself to believe that maybe, just maybe, we could change the country.