

## **Chapter 14 of *The Debate*, Vol. 2 by B. Douglas Robbins**

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We came to the tournament at U.S.C. with high hopes. Jack and I made a decent showing, but we dropped in the octafinal round to Speed and Zoë from U.C.L.A., the team that went on to take the tourney. I was feeling weak and slightly depressed about our poor showing and the sense that the Senator's Scholarship was slipping away from me. Enough so, that when Jack suggested we go to a toga party in Bel Air I quietly declined, as did most everyone else. I supposed they were feeling somewhat like myself. Cindy Wahlschbaun and Skip Mercury were the exceptions. They enthusiastically joined Jack in his bohemian scheme. Cindy and her long-standing boyfriend Keith Steadman, had recently broken up, though they remained partners. Keith went to sleep and Cindy went out.

Chandler was typically insouciant, "Don't be out too late..." whatever that meant, and handed Jack the keys to the minivan. Chandler had been drinking and intended to do some more. Jack and Cindy skipped down the hotel's dark hallway while Chandler waddled back to the bar. It wasn't until the following morning that I discovered that anything was wrong.

"Elric, wake up," Jack Watco rocked my heavy body, then ran to the light switch.

Jack and Cindy stood before me in the hotel room, like attendants awaiting instruction. Cindy stared past me.

"Something's wrong with Cindy," Jack's skin was oily and porous.

I sat up, "What's the matter?"

"She won't talk, I think she's sick. I think we need to take her to the hospital."

"What happened?"

"I knew something was wrong last night. I fucking knew it! She was quiet last night too," he shook his head, "Shit. Chandler says it's nothing."

I touched her arm. She flinched. Her eyes were immutable. Moribund silence. Like a tomb. “What happened?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Shit. Elric, let’s get her to a hospital.”

“Cindy,” I asked softly, “do you want to go to the hospital?” She was stone. I asked again and nothing. “Jack, what do you know?”

“I don’t know anything except she looks really bad. Doesn’t she look bad? Chandler thinks it’s just something she took, but I don’t know.”

She looked bad, but there were no outward signs, no blood, no lacerations or bruises to indicate concussions. She wasn’t crying or complaining, vomiting, or sneezing. In fact she wasn’t doing anything. It was like she’d gone home. And Jack didn’t know that anything had happened; we were only left with what wasn’t happening. The hospital seemed a little extreme. I wanted to find out what Chandler thought.

“Well, what do we have here gentlemen?” we moved into Chandler’s room while he rubbed his nose below his eyeglasses. He was barefoot in a long Dickens nightgown, while Jack tried to explain again what he didn’t know. Chandler swept his chubby hand over Cindy’s shoulder, “Tell me dear, what ails you.” She was a rabbit in the headlights. “What’s going on here, Jack? I told you she’d be fine after breakfast. Probably just some funny pills. It’ll wear off.” Jack anxiously tried to explain that he thought there was a bigger problem. Chandler interrupted his stops and starts with a careful nod, “Yeaaaas- I’ve seen it before. Jack, I don’t **blame** you—no one’s **blaming** anyone-” he emphasized as if it were an easy mistake we could all make, namely blame Jack. Chandler floated his round head in the momentary pause, “Cindy has apparently imbibed some strange brew, shall we say? Now, I’ve been coaching for oh,” he glanced upward, elbow in hand, “ever since I took my Masters, so about twelve years now, and I’ve seen it all. Now, I can’t **officially** sanction what went on last night but I think it does no-one any good, Cindy especially, if we go run off half-cocked to a hospital or some other institution that is just as likely to say, exaggerate, our problem as they are to fix it. You see, I’ve dealt with this before. By the time we fly into SFO she’ll be quite well and chipper as a lark.”

“You don’t think we should do anything?” I asked.

“Oh—we should certainly be pro-active, and I think what is warranted in such a context is a wait-and-see pro-activity. Now, I’m not saying I condone drug use, but at your age I recognize the need to experiment and such. I think we should be real world about

this, if you will. **Shaming** her benefits no-one. For this reason if no other, we should call a duck a duck and deal with the case at hand,” he looked for consensus, nodding, pretty hands flitting.

Jack watched Cindy stare like an unfocused china doll. He creaked, “I don’t think we can sit on this. She’s not well. We’ve decided to take her to the hospital.”

“Hmmm,” Chandler preened down, “you’ve decided, ah?”

“Yeah.”

Chandler thought this over, switching elbows to hands, “And you’re quite certain she’s ill?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty sure.”

“So you’ve seen this before? You’re a physician by trade or just by proclamation?”

Jack wasn’t ready for that, “Wha—You **know** I’m not a doctor,” Jack laughed as if there was a joke to get, “If I was a doctor we wouldn’t need to see one.”

“Ahh—precisely! Now, this is what I’m saying boys,” his rubbery face expressed an emotion, “There are **things** to be considered. We **are** a squad. This is not a rule by one, Jack. Shouldn’t we consult with the rest of the members about this. This affects us all.” He nodded furiously from Jack to me to Cindy as if we were nodding back, but we weren’t. “Come come,” Chandler began calling the squad on the hotel phone. Soon Caius and Skip and David drifted in.

“You see Jack, these debate trips are very tricky things. There are a whole panoply of issues to concern yourself with. I must look after the team as a **whole**. You understand that?”

Jack started to say something, but Chandler turned his back and swung around again, “Now, we all have rights and responsibilities, you, for example had a certain **responsibility** last night to look after our girl, to sort of guard against these kind of negative impact scenarios, shall we call them? Now, what’s going to happen to you, Jack when the administration finds out you’ve been procuring alcohol, or God knows what else for a minor? It doesn’t look good. There are **rules** for these sorts of things. I don’t want to see anything happen to you Jack, but I have to say I’m a little **dis-a-pointed** in you I really **did** expect more.”

I felt myself sinking. A pernicious blackness seeped all over and no matter how much light and truth you shined on it it still blobbed onward because it had **mass**. I felt as if I had been here before. Jack fought it, “I don’t give a shit about the rules,” he

grinned nervously, “I **don’t** care. I just, we need to get her some help. She’s **catatonic** for chrissakes!”

“Jack, Jack,” Chandler whispered and pushed his hands downward, “**You** may not care about anything but **I** do. That’s my job and I intend to do it come hell or high-water.” Chandler watched David, Caius, and Skip for their reaction, “Now don’t get bent out of shape just because she’s giving you the silent treatment.”

“The silent-”

“Now, now, let me finish. We cannot let her behavior dictate the proper course of action. We cannot reward her rebellion by punishing the whole team! We need to get home, everyone has class, I have research.”

“Chandler,” I jumped in, “We have a sick person here. Okay? she’s not giving us the silent treatment, she’s sick. You don’t have to get involved if you don’t want, but we’re taking-”

“Oh, but we’re **all** involved, Elric. I’m involved up to by bootstraps, you’re involved! I don’t know what you have to gain, Mr. Grundle, but you’ll pardon us if we think twice before following your recommendations. You seem to have a history of, let’s say, having a difficult time discerning fakery from reality.” I felt all the hot shame that wasn’t mine. I had to not get sucked down into that reality:

“Chandler, do you really think she’s giving us the silent treatment?” I scanned the other debaters incredulously, “Come on!” I brought the others in. Even Caius, the stout novice brawler could see there was something deeply disturbing going on. Trying to draw support, I looked full-on at him. *Say something, say it!*

“Yeah!” Caius nodded his square head.

“What do **you** suggest we do Chandler?” I asked.

Caius was all over it, “Yeah! What are you gonna do about it? What are you gonna **do!**”

“I’ll tell you once you’ve calmed down!” Chandler’s rubber face showed the strain, like mashed bushings, “Are you calm?” No answer. “We’re going back to Palo Alto and take this matter up with the proper agencies **there**. Okay? Are you satisfied?”

“No,” I cracked, “That’s what **you** want to do. That’s not in the interest of the team as a whole, that’s not in the interest of Cindy’s welfare certainly, that’s not what everyone else thinks we should do.”

“Do I have to remind you that we **all** have something to

lose? That Scholarship I know you're so fond of, invariably finds ownership in the hands of the debaters who, under times of stress show proper judgment. That is what leadership is. I'd hate for you to lose sight of the larger picture here."

I beamed into his globby girth as if his threats didn't affect me. But they did. I wanted that scholarship badly. I'd taken to reading Scott Turrow's *IL* over and over until the binding pealed, just to read those sacred words repeatedly: Harvard Law School, Harvard Law School...

"Okay Chandler," I steadied, "If she's playing some weird silent treatment game, why don't **you** speak with her?"

"Yeah," joined Caius, "You talk to her." At that the principle of group accord took over. David nodded as did Skip and Jack. Loc Chandler stood alone.

"When she speaks to me will that satisfy you?" he laid down the bright line. I almost wished he hadn't because if he lost, he **clearly lost**, and my Scholarship was the sacrificial lamb.

"Cindy, sweetie-" Chandler demurred. Arms crossed, Cindy stood her back up against no wall. Her globe eyes were hollow and her drawn cheeks were perfect and painful.

Chandler put his soft arm around her shoulder. They were about the same height, "Now, now there there. Everything's going to be alright. You're safe now and I won't let anyone hurt you.

"You're okay, aren't you? Now now, we're gonna take care of you," his crumbling tone etched strange lines over his face, "Now, you know your coach is doing his best don't you? Of course you do. Remember when you asked me to speak with your parents to reassure them that everything would be fine and dandy, and that our road trips are as safe as houses? You remember that. You know why I did that? I did that because I believed in you. I believed in your maturity and your strength, and that's the truth. But I can protect you only so much. At a certain point I have to hand the ball off, because we're a team, and we're all team players. Now, if you're **really** sick we'll have to take you to the hospital. It's our duty to care for the well being of the team, is it not? And then I won't be able to protect you anymore...sweetheart...and...at the hospital they'll run a battery of tests and they'll probe until they find everything. Then they will notify your parents, as they are required to by the law. I won't be able to protect you anymore, and it will all come out. What happened, what you've been doing, everyone will know. It will break your daddy's heart but he'll know. Now, Cindy, what's a coach to do? You have the ball-"

She whispered something.

“What dear? What did you say?”

She began weeping hopelessly, “I want to go home.”

“You heard her boys. Pack em up.”