

THE LIBERTY BOX (BOOK #1)

EXCERPT

Prologue: Twenty-Four Years Ago

Smoke billowed up into the sky as far as the eye could see. Calmly, Benjamin Voltolini weaved his way through the crowd, his dark hair swept back, revealing an enormous forehead. He held his head erect, and kept his expression vacant, but with a hint of amusement that he could not quite erase. He took a step back as a looter dashed in front of him with a torch, lobbing it at the vacant bank not ten feet away. Within minutes, the bank went up in flames. The other looters cheered, throwing rocks to shatter the windows, or lobbing more torches for good measure as Voltolini moved through the crowd and away from the flames.

The banks had gotten the worst of it from the start.

Voltolini had intentionally ripped his clothes and caked them in mud to blend in, so that he could steal a large container of gasoline from one of the few remaining gas stations. He paused every so often to change his grip or wipe the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, keeping as far away from the flames as he could.

He'd left his Maserati well outside the city limits. He had a long way to go.

By the time Voltolini drove up to the fortress built into the side of the mountain, the sun dipped low behind it. Two armed guards stood by a high chain link gate, and they leveled their machine guns at him as he slowed to approach.

"Whatever happened to a simple greeting?" Voltolini muttered to himself, but raised his hands in the air behind the windshield.

One of the guards pulled some sort of device to his mouth and spoke rapidly as he jogged to Voltolini's window.

"Identify yourself and state your business!"

"Benjamin Voltolini, Venture Capitalist." Voltolini's teeth gleamed in perfect rows. "Here to present to the former Congress of the United States of America the answer to all of their problems."

"Do you know any members of the Tribunal personally? Have they summoned you?"

"I guarantee they all know me by reputation."

"Get lost," the guard ordered.

"Oh, I don't think you want to do that, Sergeant—" Voltolini read the young man's lapel, "—Filbert, and I'll tell you why. Pretty soon I will be the dictator of this country. And I *never* forget a favor." After a slight hesitation, he added with a hint of a smile, "Nor a slight."

"I tell you what, you arrogant bastard," Sergeant Branson snarled, moving the safety off of his weapon. "I'll give you to the count of ten, and by the end of it if your tires aren't screaming on this pavement," he pointed out into the wasteland, raising his gun, "I'll give you exactly what you deserve."

Voltolini looked Sergeant Branson up and down, as if committing him to memory. "Go on, then."

The sergeant's mouth fell open for a moment, unsure how to respond to this. "One!" he shouted, "Two!"

Voltolini watched him as the sergeant's face turned various shades of red and finally puce by the time he reached number nine. Then, just as he leveled the weapon with Voltolini's face and was about to pronounce the number ten, Voltolini punched the accelerator as hard as he could—not in reverse, toward the wasteland behind him, but toward the locked chain link gate up ahead. The other armed guard scarcely had time to leap out of the way before Voltolini plowed through. The gate itself snapped open and huge sections of the fence clattered to the ground in its wake.

He saw the commotion behind him from the rearview mirror, but didn't slow down until he reached the courtyard, skidding to a stop just before he crushed a fountain in the shape of an eagle. The burnt rubber smell assaulted him even before he opened his car door.

He stepped out, opened his arms wide, and held up his hands in a gesture of both surrender and welcome as most of what remained of the Congress filed out of the meeting hall in disbelief.

"So this is the secret lair of the last vestiges of Congress!" he declared.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" snapped an old man with a shiny pate.

Voltolini gave a little bow. "Forgive my rather dramatic entrance, gentlemen. It was the only way I could get past your guards. Excellent young men. You should give them both a raise." He chuckled at his own joke.

"Nobody gets paid anymore," snapped one of them unnecessarily.

"Oh?" Voltolini raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. "Well, that's a shame. I can help you fix that."

"You can help us pay our guards?" cried one, incredulous.

"I can help you get paid again yourselves," Voltolini clarified, "you and everyone else in this country. Well..." he chuckled again, "more or less."

"That's Ben Voltolini," he heard one of them whisper to another, and then the whispers swept throughout the crowd. "The billionaire?" and "Where did he get gas for that car from, anyway?"

Voltolini gestured inside the fortress, adding, "May I?"

Now the members of the Tribunal stepped aside one by one, exchanging glances with one another that suggested they knew this was against their better judgment—but really, what harm could there be in hearing him out?

The entrance led to a long hall lit by torches, the light from the sky growing dimmer and dimmer as they walked.

Torches, everywhere torches, Voltolini thought with disgust. It was like the Dark Ages all over again. But not for long. Everything is about to change.

At last the hall opened up to a wide, irregularly shaped room looking like it had been hewn out of the side of a mountain—which, in fact, it had. The men filed in behind him to their seats, and Voltolini walked to the white boards at the front and grabbed a marker. He wouldn't need to draw much, but this established to all that he had the floor, which was his intention.

"Gentlemen," he grinned. "Let me summarize your current position. You have attempted to maintain order as a police state, but you haven't the manpower to arrest all the rioters. So instead you have resorted to gunning down citizens at will. I am not judging you." He held up his hands as the protests began, the mocking smirk never leaving his face. "I understand that there is a greater good at stake. You are doing all you can to maintain order. But you and I both know that it is not enough. Creating order, and maintaining it, requires money."

"As if we don't already know that," someone shouted from the front row.

"Ah, yes," Voltolini said calmly. "But where does the government get its money from?"

The question was patronizing, and the Tribunal glowered at him collectively, refusing to play along.

Undaunted, Voltolini answered his own question. "Taxes," he said.

"There's nothing for us to tax, idiot!" shouted one. "There's nothing left!"

"Of course there is not. The people have to get back to work first so that you can garnish their wages. But I understand your conundrum—how can you create jobs for them when there is no industry left, when the few functional businesses that remain are being razed to the ground as we speak by angry citizens needing to feed their starving families?"

"This is where I come in." One hand fluttered to his chest, an affected gesture he'd perfected. "In the last ten years, I've funded two projects in particular that have the potential to turn this nation around, from absolute destitution and anarchy to a thriving Republic." He paused. "Yes, that's right, I said Republic, not Democracy." He waited to be asked. When nobody did, he continued, unfazed, "The first of these projects is a genetically engineered version of the Epstein Barr Virus, distributed by an airborne vaccinia vector." He uncapped his marker and drew a squiggly line on the white board, and an incomplete squiggly circle next to it. Then he drew an arrow, where the first squiggly line fit inside the circle. "This," he pointed to the circle, "represents the vaccinia vector. It is a version of smallpox, minus the portion that makes it smallpox. Now it's just a shell, a perfect delivery system for other genetic information. It has been engineered to cover hundreds of miles at a time once it is released. In this case, it is a delivery system for the Epstein Barr virus. This particular strain is highly virulent—much more so than the original strain, primarily causing anemia and severe fatigue."

Voltolini read confusion and disgust on their faces. One said, "So you want to make us all sick?"

"Not sick," Ben held up one finger, "just too tired to fight. Temporarily of course. I do have vaccines against the virus for a select few." He grinned. "This step will buy us about six months."

"Six months to do what?" someone shouted.

"I'm so glad you asked," Voltolini said graciously. "The U.S. collapsed because every man looked out for his own interests and not for those of his fellow man. I state the obvious, of course. It was because of greed that eventually all of the government programs to support the needy ran out of funds, leading to irreconcilable debt and inflation, which led to our ultimate demise as a nation."

"This from you, the greediest of them all!" someone snarled.

Voltolini raised his eyebrows in mock offense. "On the contrary, I am proving right now that I've invested my wealth in the ultimate good of the people."

"Get to the point, Voltolini," one of the growled.

"My point is this. If we can simply... *persuade* the people to think in terms of the greater good, then all of us could rebuild a nation much stronger than the U.S. ever was."

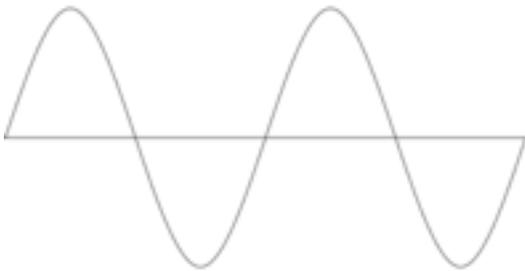
"Oh, brilliant," cried one voice, "let's just *persuade* them! Why didn't we think of that?"

As if he had not heard, Voltolini went on, "I agree that socialism does not work, in most cases, because men are too busy looking out for themselves. They protest. They rebel against their lot. Of course, mere arguments will not do the trick."

Then he fell silent, waiting until someone shouted in exasperation, "Then what do you propose?"

"Just this." His eyes twinkled. "We must fundamentally change human nature. We must change the way men *think*."

Blank stares met him. Voltolini turned to the white board again, erased the vaccinia vector and its contents, and instead drew something he only just remembered from high school: a sine wave.



“Pretend for a moment, gentlemen, that this is a brain wave. Everyone, every human being, has a brain wave that corresponds to this carrier wave. Variations upon the carrier are what transmit information.

“Now. Suppose it’s possible to alter that wave? What if we, the government, the Tribunal, could broadcast a slightly altered version of the common human carrier brain wave?”

Dead silence. Then someone shouted, “How?”

“Ah,” he said. “I will tell you the moment you swear your allegiance to me.”

A ripple of uneasy laughter swept through the room in pockets, and then died away. He wasn’t joking, and he watched them as if marking in his mind who had laughed.

Voltolini shrugged, staring them down. “The reality, gentlemen, is that you have no choice but to implement my plan. You have no alternatives. You know you haven’t.”

“What will you call yourself? The President?” shouted one, scornfully.

“Oh, no no no,” Voltolini said, softly. “The title of President implies a democracy, and I do not wish to be misleading. I will call myself—the Potentate.” Yes, he thought, sighing with pleasure. *What an appropriate title.*

The Speaker for the Tribunal put it to a vote. Ben Voltolini was elected Potentate with an eighty-five percent majority, in the last democratic act of the former Congress of the United States of America.

As his first act as Potentate, Voltolini declared that the nation would henceforth be known as the Republic of the Americas.

“Gentlemen of the Tribunal,” he declared, “we are making history. Together, we shall create the world’s very first utopia.”

