

FIREWALL

A Play in Three Acts

by Butch Maxwell

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Firewall

Cast of Characters

DR. MIRANDA ASHCROFT: Female, 45–70. Senior political strategist and former academic. Architect of the campaign's messaging. Precise, principled, and increasingly willing to compromise both.

ETHAN COLE: Male, 35–45. Campaign speechwriter. Raised in Fairfield County, a mile from Harlan Works. Believes in the candidate. Watching himself stop believing in the campaign.

CLAIRE DONNLEY: Female, 25–50. Campaign pollster. Pragmatic and efficient. Measures everything. Occasionally notices what the numbers don't capture.

JULIAN PARK: Male, 25–35. Director of Digital Strategy. Built his career inside Miranda's ideas. Has been watching the gap between the ideas and the methods widen for weeks.

Place

A campaign war room. One room. Four people. Five weeks.

Time

The present. From Day 3 through Day 35 of a primary campaign.

Set Requirements

Single interior set. A conference table, chairs, a whiteboard, laptops. The whiteboard changes throughout — it is the visual record of the campaign's moral erosion. No scene changes. No blackouts requiring set movement. Minimal technical demands.

ACT I

Scene 1

Setting: *A campaign war room. A conference table dominates the space. A whiteboard on one wall — clean and organized, messaging pillars in neat columns: "Restore Trust." "Policy Over Panic." "Accountability, Not Animus." "The Work Ahead." Laptops, legal pads, polling printouts.*

At Rise: *Day three of the campaign. MIRANDA stands at the whiteboard, reading it. JULIAN is at his laptop. ETHAN has a legal pad covered in notes. CLAIRE has polling printouts spread across the table.*

JULIAN

With five weeks to the primary, Whitfield's holding the lane — policy speech, institutional frame. But Voss is closing. Big news is Harlan Works closing. Twenty-eight hundred jobs. Pension obligations unresolved. Parent company headquartered in Stamford. The announcement broke at six this morning.

MIRANDA

Whitfield's statement.

JULIAN

Forty minutes ago. Workforce retraining. Federal trade enforcement. Infrastructure package. He stayed in the lane.

CLAIRE

Voss was on the air in twenty minutes.

MIRANDA

What's he running?

CLAIRE

Economic invasion. Foreign ownership.

(Reading.)

"They sent your jobs to people who hate you."

A beat.

ETHAN

That's not a policy. That's an ignition switch.

CLAIRE

It's moving.

ETHAN

Everything moves at six in the morning when twenty-eight hundred people just lost their jobs.

CLAIRE

It was moving before six.

Ethan looks at Miranda.

MIRANDA

What are the numbers, Julian?

JULIAN

It's three hours old. But the sentiment tracking in Fairfield County — anger velocity is significant.

ETHAN

Fairfield?

JULIAN

Yes.

A half-beat. Ethan nods. He writes something down. He doesn't explain.

JULIAN

The Voss frame is already clustering.

MIRANDA

Meaning people are using his language.

JULIAN

It detached from his accounts forty minutes ago. People are rewriting it in their own words now.

A beat.

CLAIRE

We need a response by noon.

MIRANDA

We have a response. Whitfield gave it.

CLAIRE

Whitfield gave a policy framework.

MIRANDA

That's what we are.

CLAIRE

That's what we want to be.

A silence. Miranda looks at the whiteboard.

MIRANDA

Ethan. The stump language. Where are we on Harlan?

ETHAN

I can have something in two hours. Stays in the lane. Leads with the families, moves to the policy, closes on Whitfield's record on trade enforcement.

MIRANDA

Good.

ETHAN

It won't match Voss's velocity.

MIRANDA

It's not supposed to.

ETHAN

I know. I'm just —

MIRANDA

I know what you're doing. Write it anyway.

Ethan writes. He believes her.

JULIAN

The collar counties — three precincts bordering Fairfield and split last cycle — they're in the Harlan supply chain. Machine parts, logistics, secondary suppliers. The closure touches them indirectly but they know it.

CLAIRE

They'll feel it before they know it.

JULIAN

They already do. Sentiment is moving there too.

MIRANDA

Voss's frame travels to the collar counties?

JULIAN

His frame travels anywhere the wound is. He didn't build the wound. He just —

(Beat.)

— he found the frequency.

(A beat.)

The platform doesn't reward restraint. It rewards activation. Voss understood that before we did.

A beat. Miranda looks at the whiteboard. At "Policy Over Panic."

MIRANDA

(A half-beat — not doubt. Something she's deciding not to look at.)

We stay clean.

CLAIRE

Miranda —

MIRANDA

We stay clean. Whitfield ran on institutional restoration. The moment we match Voss's architecture we hand him the argument that everyone does it. We don't do it. That's the campaign.

CLAIRE

(Evenly.)

The campaign was designed before Harlan.

MIRANDA

The campaign was designed for exactly this. This is the test, not the exception.

Claire looks at her printouts. She doesn't argue.

JULIAN

Engagement on Whitfield's statement. Flat. Donations since the announcement — down four percent.

A beat.

ETHAN

(Without looking up from his legal pad.)

It's day three.

JULIAN

Yes.

ETHAN

Give it time.

JULIAN

People aren't watching the speech anymore. They're watching reactions to the speech.

A beat.

JULIAN (continued)

Voss clipped Whitfield's trade line before the event was over. County chairs are already pushing it into local groups.

ETHAN

It's been an hour.

JULIAN

The governor's office fed the clip package to county chairs before Whitfield's speech ended.

A beat.

JULIAN (continued)

He's already using it.

Ethan looks up. He and Julian hold a beat — two people watching the same thing from adjacent angles, neither able to stop it.

MIRANDA

(To Claire.)

Noon messaging. I want to see it before it goes out.

CLAIRE

You'll have it.

MIRANDA

And it stays in the lane.

CLAIRE

(A beat.)

It stays in the lane.

Miranda turns back to the whiteboard. She reads "Policy Over Panic." She believes it.

Ethan writes. Julian watches his screen. Claire is already on her phone.

The whiteboard is full and clean and everything is still in place.

Blackout.

ACT I

Scene 2

Setting: *The same war room. Day eleven. The whiteboard shows Whitfield's messaging pillars: "Restore Trust." "Policy Over Panic." "The Work Ahead."*

At Rise: *Julian has a laptop open. Polling printouts on the table. Claire stands. Ethan sits. Miranda is at the whiteboard, reading it.*

JULIAN

Twelve days since the Harlan announcement. Whitfield's policy speech moved nothing. Engagement flat. Donation velocity declining. Voss's numbers in Fairfield County — up nine.

MIRANDA

What's he running?

JULIAN

Same frame. He added a line this week. "They sent your jobs to people who hate you — and Whitfield helped them do it."

CLAIRE

It's activating.

MIRANDA

It's activating his people.

CLAIRE

His people used to be persuadable.

A beat.

JULIAN

She's right. The crosstabs show movement in the collar counties. Voters who split last cycle. They're not committed — they're responding to the first coherent story about what happened to them.

ETHAN

Whitfield gave them a coherent story.

CLAIRE

He gave them a policy framework.

ETHAN

That's the same thing.

CLAIRE

It isn't.

Ethan looks to Miranda.

MIRANDA

It isn't.

ETHAN

So, what are we saying — meet him in the gutter?

MIRANDA

No.

ETHAN

Then what?

MIRANDA

We give them a villain who's actually responsible.

A beat.

ETHAN

We have a villain. It's called corporate consolidation and federal trade policy.

MIRANDA

That's an argument. I need a sentence.

JULIAN

Voss has a sentence.

MIRANDA

He has a target. Immigrants. Foreign ownership. Something with a face.

(A beat.)

We give them the correct face.

ETHAN

Meaning.

MIRANDA

The board of Harlan Steel & Fabricating approved the closure from a conference room in Stamford, Connecticut. They were not from Fairfield County. They did not grow up in Fairfield County. They will not retire in Fairfield County. Their decision had a specific logic — quarterly earnings, liability exposure, offshore manufacturing costs — and that logic had a cost, and twenty-eight hundred people are paying it.

ETHAN

That's true.

MIRANDA

Yes.

ETHAN

So is a lot of things.

MIRANDA

Ethan —

ETHAN

Naming the board isn't naming the system. It's naming people.

MIRANDA

People made this decision.

ETHAN

And now we put their faces on it.

MIRANDA

Voss puts faces on it. We put accountability on it. That's a different thing.

Ethan is quiet. He is not convinced. He is waiting.

CLAIRE

The framing is already tested. Corporate abandonment. Out-of-state decision-making. "Your livelihoods were sacrificed for quarterly earnings." It moves in Fairfield. It moves in the collar counties. It doesn't activate the wrong people — it activates our people.

ETHAN

(To Miranda.)

Is this still "Policy Over Panic?"

MIRANDA

Policy is accountability.

(A beat.)

I fought a tax abatement deal in Allegheny County for two years. The same logic. Different company. I know what this wound is.

A beat. It slips out cleanly. She doesn't underline it.

ETHAN

I know you do.

MIRANDA

Then you know I'm not inventing the grievance.

ETHAN

I know you're not.

(A beat.)

That's not what worries me.

Silence.

MIRANDA

(To Julian.)

What's Voss running in the next media window?

JULIAN

Targeting Fairfield and the three adjacent counties. Same frame, escalating.

Miranda moves to the whiteboard. She picks up the eraser. She removes "Accountability, Not Animus" — not in anger, not with ceremony. As if correcting something that no longer applies.

MIRANDA

Then we don't have the luxury of waiting for a better option.

(To Claire.)

Draft the counter-frame. Boardrooms, not borders.
Corporate decision-making, not foreign ownership. "They
chose quarterly earnings over your pension." Accountability,
not animus. Get it to the digital team by six.

CLAIRE

Done.

*Ethan stands. He goes to the whiteboard. He reads "Policy
Over Panic." He doesn't erase it. Not yet.*

ETHAN

(Quietly.)

And if it moves the same levers?

MIRANDA

It won't. We're naming what's real.

*Ethan looks at the board. He leaves "Policy Over Panic"
where it is. He sits.*

JULIAN

(Quietly, to himself or to the room.)

The sentiment package goes out at six.

*No one responds. Claire is already on her phone. Miranda
has returned to her copy. The whiteboard still reads "Policy
Over Panic."*

Blackout.