The Firestarter

B Alan Bourgeois · Opening excerpt · 1 of 2

The television flickered with the familiar cadence of disappointment.

“…and I say again,” Senator Arthur Lyle’s voice boomed through the living room speakers, “we must not allow the billionaire class to hijack our democracy. The time for resistance is now!”

Milo Grady, hunched in a threadbare recliner, narrowed his eyes at the screen. Lyle stood at the center of a brightly lit town hall in Philadelphia, his arms raised like a prophet, the crowd thundering in approval. The applause was loud. The promises louder.

Milo grabbed the remote and muted the sound. He didn’t need to hear the rest. He’d heard it a hundred times—same script, same fury, same lack of follow-through.

He rubbed his jaw, heavy with unshaven stubble, and muttered to himself, “Been saying the same damn thing for twenty years, Art.”

The walls of his modest apartment bore the fading color of neglect. Stacked boxes filled with flyers from old union efforts sat next to a coffee table cluttered with dog-eared books: Democracy in Chains, Winners Take All, Nickel and Dimed. All testaments to a fight Milo had been waging in spirit, if not with power.

Reading sample — continued

A metallic click drew his attention. The radiator hissed to life—one of the few things in his building that still worked. Outside, a March wind howled across the gray sprawl of Dayton, Ohio. The once-thriving factory town now bore scars in empty storefronts and boarded-up homes.

Milo picked up a coffee mug and swirled the last of his cold brew. He tilted it back, grimaced, and turned back to the screen. Senator Lyle now paced the stage like a seasoned preacher.

“But how?” a young woman in the audience asked, cutting through the noise. “What are you actually doing about it, Senator? What bill? What action?”

Milo leaned forward.

Lyle paused. “The truth is,” he said, suddenly measured, “the system is very complicated. We’re building coalitions. We’re laying the groundwork—”

Milo threw the mug. It hit the TV stand and shattered, shards of ceramic skittering across the floor.

“Bullshit,” he said, rising from the chair. His chest thudded with a sudden rush of adrenaline. “We’re dying out here while you build coalitions?”

He paced the room, hands twitching, jaw tight. The weight of years—lost jobs, funerals, broken unions—pressed down on him. He picked up his phone, opened the Notes app, and started typing furiously.