

# 2028

A Novel in Three Books

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Opening Sample — Book One: Last Assembly

*Uncorrected text · Not for distribution*

# The Stewardship Doctrine

## § 3.2 — *First-Year Implementation Sequencing*

The window for structural reform is narrowest in the first year and closes predictably thereafter. Historical analysis of prior administrations confirms that workforce alignment must precede programmatic restructuring: an unreformed civil service will absorb, dilute, or quietly reverse any policy initiative passed through its existing channels. The recommended sequence is therefore:

**Phase 1 (Days 1–90): Workforce Alignment.** Reclassify senior Register personnel from protected-schedule to discretionary-schedule positions. Introduce an attestation mechanism tied to the current Stewardship’s stated priorities. Employees who decline attestation within the compliance window are reclassified automatically; no termination action is required. The attrition is self-selecting and, by design, surfaces the points of deepest institutional resistance for administrative action. Legacy employees who attest may be retained at the discretion of their Directorate head. Those who do not will have separated voluntarily.

**Phase 2 (Days 60–180, overlapping): Institutional Consolidation.** With aligned personnel in place, redirect funding streams from legacy public institutions to consolidated delivery models operated under Stewardship standards. Education is the recommended entry point: public school expenditures are locally visible, emotionally salient, and politically difficult to defend once a superior alternative has been made available in the same district. Route the per-pupil allocation through a portable voucher; the funding follows the child, and the parent makes the choice. No institution is closed. Enrollment simply migrates to the higher-performing alternative, and legacy facilities are decommissioned as demand warrants. The optics are parental choice. The mechanism is fiscal elimination through voluntary attrition.

**Phase 3 (Days 120–365): Regulatory Streamlining.** Remaining oversight bodies whose statutory authority predates the current

Stewardship operate, by definition, on inherited assumptions about the scope and purpose of federal intervention. Where those assumptions conflict with the Steward’s priorities, the recommended approach is not repeal — which requires legislative action and invites public debate — but *funding review*. An agency whose budget is reduced to administrative maintenance levels retains its statutory mandate on paper while losing the operational capacity to exercise it. The mandate persists. The capability does not. This distinction is important: the agency has not been abolished. It has been *right-sized* to reflect the current Stewardship’s resource priorities. Any characterization of this process as “defunding” is, by definition, inaccurate, and should be treated as such in public communications.

The three phases are designed to overlap. A Steward who waits for Phase 1 to complete before initiating Phase 2 has misunderstood the purpose of sequencing: the phases are not steps but *waves*, each creating the conditions — and, critically, the personnel — for the next. By the end of the first year, a properly sequenced implementation will have produced a Register that is aligned, an institutional landscape that is consolidating, and a regulatory environment that is, in practical terms, *clarified* — all without a single new piece of legislation reaching the Assembly floor.

— *The Stewardship Doctrine* (Anchor Institute, 14th ed.), Ch. 3: “Structural Prerequisites for Transformational Governance”

## One — The Calendar

The calendar on the refrigerator was color-coded, and the colors were the closest thing Ellen Kowalski had to a philosophy of life.

Blue was Sam. Green was work. Red was her mother, which had started, three years ago, as red for the appointments and had become, without anyone deciding it, red for everything — the calls, the pharmacy, the long Sunday drives out to Cedar Line and the longer drives back. Yellow was the rest of it, the things that belonged to no one, the water bill and the oil change and the dentist she kept meaning to call and didn't. She bought the markers in a four-pack at the drugstore and when the red ran dry she felt it as a small personal event, the way you might feel a tooth go, and she bought another pack that was really three packs of colors she didn't need for the one she did.

It was a Tuesday in what the news had started calling the first year, though Ellen did not think of it as the first year of anything. It was the year Sam turned ten. It was the year her mother's cardiologist retired and handed her mother's heart to a younger man who talked fast and looked at the chart more than at the woman. It was a year like the years, and it moved as they moved, which was quickly at the small scale and not at all at the large one, so that a Tuesday could vanish between the coffee and the front door and yet October could sit there for weeks refusing to become November.

She wrote things down because if she did not write them down they did not happen — not that she forgot them, exactly, but that they lost their grip, floated loose, turned into the low anxiety that was the actual weather of her days. On the fridge the anxiety had edges. On the fridge it was a Tuesday with a blue square that said *Sam — library books due* and a green square that said *Renewals mtg 2:00* and a red square, this week, blessedly small, that said only *Mom — refill*. She could look at the week and know its shape. That was all she wanted, most weeks. To know the shape of the thing before it arrived.

The office was warm in the way of offices. Ellen sat at the front desk of the Calloway regional branch and had sat there for six years, and before that at a desk very like it for a company that no longer existed, and the work was the work: she answered the phone, she pulled the files, she told people whose houses had flooded or whose cars had folded that yes, the claim was received, yes, someone would call, and she did it in a voice that had taken her the better part of a decade to build, a voice with a floor under it. People called her when the worst had already happened. The trick, which no one taught you, was to be the first solid thing they touched after.

By ten o'clock she had processed four renewals and told a man named Petrakis that his adjuster would reach him Thursday and listened to a woman cry about a basement for as long as the woman needed, which was eleven minutes, Ellen watching the little clock in the corner of her screen not out of impatience but because someone had to hold the time while the woman let go of it. This was a thing Ellen understood about herself and did not say aloud because it sounded grand and it was not grand. She was good at being the place other people's trouble landed. The building could have been anything. It happened to be insurance. It could have been a hospital desk or a school office or the counter at the DMV where the light was bad and the line was long and yet, if you were lucky, some woman with a floor under her voice would find your name in the system and say, there you are, I've got you, here's what happens next.

That was the country, too, though Ellen would not have put it that way and would have been embarrassed to. You paid in. You stood in the line. And behind the counter, if the thing worked, was a person whose whole job was to find your name and tell you what happened next. Ellen did not think this. She only lived inside it, the way you live inside a house without admiring the joists.

At noon she ate a sandwich at her desk and looked at her phone, which showed her the news as it showed everyone the news, which was to say sideways, in fragments, between a video of a dog and an ad for the shoes she had looked at once and would now be shown forever. A man in a suit had signed something. The word *directive* was in the headline and

Ellen did not open it. There was always a man in a suit signing something. Her father had said that, near the end, watching the little television in the room at Cedar Line where her mother would later have her own room — *the men come and go and the paperwork stays* — and she had thought it was cynicism and understood only later that it was comfort, that he had meant it kindly, that he had been telling her the world was built to outlast its own worst days. She missed her father in specific small ways, like a tool you only reach for once a year and then it is not in the drawer.

She texted the sitter about pickup. She moved the dentist from yellow to yellow, a different week, the fourth time. She did not open the headline.

Sam was waiting on the school steps when she pulled up, which meant it had been a bad day, because on good days he made her come find him among the others and on bad days he was already at the edge, bag on both shoulders, watching the road. He got in and put the bag between his feet and did the seatbelt without being told, which was another sign.

“How was it,” she said, and pulled out, and did not push.

He looked out the window. There were rooms of him she used to be let into and wasn’t anymore; a year ago he would have told her everything, narrated the recess wars, the injustices, the boy named Andre who was either his best friend or his mortal enemy depending on the hour. Now he metered it out.

“Marcus is leaving,” he said finally. “His mom said. He’s going to the new school. The one out by the highway.”

“The Academy?”

“I guess.” He picked at the strap of the bag. “He said his mom said ours might not have money next year. For the after-school. And the buses.” He said it like kids say the things they have overheard, offering it up not as information but as a question wearing information’s clothes, watching her face to see how frightened to be.

“Schools always say that,” Ellen said, which was true, and was the wrong thing, and she knew it was the wrong thing even as the floor came up under her voice, the counter voice, the *there you are, I’ve got you*

voice, deploying itself now against her own son because it was the only voice she had for fear. “Every year they say the budget this and the budget that. And every year there’s a bus.” She reached over and squeezed his knee. “There’s going to be a bus.”

He let her have it. That was the thing about Sam, the thing that undid her — he could tell when she was managing him and he let her do it anyway, out of a kind of mercy, because he was ten and she was his mother and the alternative was that neither of them knew what happened next. He nodded and looked back out the window and she drove them home through a town that was working, that Tuesday, in all the ways a town works when nothing has visibly happened: the lights changed, the crossing guard raised her sign, the library had its books and the school had its doors and somewhere a man in a suit had signed something, and the paperwork, her father had promised her, would stay.

At home she moved the magnet and wrote it on the calendar before she took off her coat, because if she did not write it down it would float loose and become weather. She wrote it small, in blue, because it was Sam’s, in the square for Friday where there was still room.

*Marcus — last day?*

She looked at it a moment. Then she capped the pen, and put it in the drawer where the pens lived, and went to start the water for the pasta, and the evening closed over the day the way water closes over a stone, leaving for a while a ring, and then not even that.

## Two — Six Years Out

Daniel Osei kept the count in pencil, because pencil could be corrected and the point of a record was not permanence but accuracy, and the two were often confused by people who had never had to amend one.

The log was a school composition book, the kind with the marbled cover, and he was on his fourth. He had started the first one twenty-two years ago, not with the pension in mind — a man of thirty-two does not keep a ledger against a day thirty years off — but simply because the Register ran on records and he had come to believe, early and without drama, that a person who worked inside a system of records ought to keep one of his own. It had begun as case notes. It had become, over time, the count. Pay periods, not years; years were for people who wanted to feel better, and pay periods were for people who wanted to be right. He was one hundred and fifty-six pay periods from a full pension. He knew this as he knew his own address. He did not dwell on it. He simply kept it accurate, the way you keep a clock accurate, not because you are always looking at it but because a clock that is wrong is worse than no clock at all.

The Register in the morning was the best version of the Register, before the phones, when the light came in flat and gray across the rows of desks and the machines woke one after another with their particular sighs, and for twenty minutes or so the place was only what it was supposed to be: a room full of people whose job was to make sure that other people, people they would never meet, got what they were owed. Daniel had processed benefits claims for twenty-two years. He had processed them under four Stewards, two of whom he had voted for and two of whom he had not, and it had never once occurred to him that this was relevant to the work, because it was not. A claim was valid or it was not. A widow was owed or she was not. The paperwork did not ask who you had voted for and this, to Daniel, was not a defect of the paperwork but its entire dignity — that it was blind in the one way that mattered and

sighted in all the others. He had said this to a dozen new hires over the years, in slightly different words, and about half of them had understood him.

Simon was in the other half, so far. Daniel had not given up.

The boy — Daniel called him the boy in his own mind and would not have dreamed of saying it aloud, the boy was twenty-four and had a degree and a way of holding his face that suggested the world had already disappointed him at least once in a manner he did not intend to forgive — the boy had been assigned to him in the spring and had learned the work quickly, which was not the same as learning it well. Simon learned things the way you learn the layout of a building you intend to leave. He was not lazy; Daniel would have known what to do with lazy. He was efficient in the specific way of a person who has decided in advance that the effort will not be rewarded and is determined not to be caught having hoped otherwise.

“You log those by hand,” Simon had said, that first week, watching Daniel enter the count. Not a question. An observation offered up for Daniel to defend, as the young offer you the chance to explain yourself so they can watch you fail to.

“I do.”

“There’s a system for that.”

“There’s a system for most things,” Daniel had said. “I’ve outlasted three of them. The composition book has outlasted all three.” He had not looked up. “The system tells you what it wants you to see. The book tells me what I put in it. Those aren’t always the same, and the difference is where the interesting things live.”

Simon had not answered, but he had not walked away either, and Daniel had marked that, privately, in the ledger he did not keep on paper. The boy’s cynicism was not the cheap kind, the kind worn like a jacket to a party. It was the expensive kind. It had cost him something. Somewhere behind it was a person who had wanted, once, to believe in a thing, and had been shown the bill for believing, and had paid it, and had resolved never to be that stupid again — and the tell, the thing Daniel watched for and saw, was that the resolution had not entirely taken. The boy still argued. You did not argue with a system you had truly given up

on. You only argued with one you were still, against your own better judgment, hoping might answer back.

It was a Wednesday when the rumor came, and it came wrong, which was the first thing Daniel noticed about it.

It came as talk. It came from Priyanka in the next row, who had it from someone in Classification, who had it from a cousin who worked somewhere Daniel didn't catch, and by the time it reached his desk it had the shape all such things have, the shape of a thing that has been carried: worn smooth in some places, exaggerated in others, missing whatever it had once had by way of source. *They're going to reclassify us. The tenure. They're going to make it — she'd said a word and stopped, hunting for it — at-will. Like we just started. Like the twenty-two years don't attach to anything.*

Daniel had listened, and nodded, and said that he would believe it when he saw the memo, and had gone back to his claim.

He believed in the memo the way another man might believe in a court, or a church. Not because memos were good — he had read ten thousand memos and most of them were the ordinary weather of a large organization, reminders about the refrigerator and the parking and the fiscal-year close — but because the memo was the point at which a thing became real, became *procedure*, became something with a number and an effective date and a section of the code it answered to, and therefore something that could be read, and cited, and if necessary opposed on its own terms. A thing that arrived as a memo had entered the system, and Daniel had spent his life inside the system, and knew its corridors, and was not afraid of anything that would agree to walk down them.

What unsettled him — and he did not name it as unsettlement until much later, going back over the day in the composition book that night, as he went back over every day, was that this thing had not come as a memo. It had come as talk, off the channel, around the side, and the part of Daniel that had survived twenty-two years and four Stewards by knowing which memos mattered understood, in a place below the part that could yet say so, that a change large enough to be true and small enough to travel as rumor was a change that did not want to be read, or cited, or opposed on its own terms. That was the thing about the

corridors he knew so well. They only protected you against what agreed to use them.

“You hear the thing,” Simon said, at the end of the day, not looking at Daniel, squaring a stack of forms that did not need squaring. Door propped open by the toe of one shoe. “The reclassification thing.”

“I heard a rumor.”

“You’re not worried.”

“I’m one hundred and fifty-six pay periods from a pension,” Daniel said, “and I’ve been one hundred and fifty-six pay periods from something my whole life. I’ll worry when there’s a memo.” He capped his pencil, which did not need capping, a mechanical pencil, an old affectation, and he saw Simon see him do it. “You should go home. It’ll keep.”

Simon did not leave the door at once. Whatever he had wanted was not the answer Daniel had given, and Daniel knew it, and gave him the other thing instead, the true thing, which he did not usually spend on the ones who had not yet earned it.

“Twenty-two years I’ve watched them try to make this place into something it isn’t,” he said. “It’s still here. I’m still here. The claims still go out.” He looked at the boy, at the disappointed set of a face too young to have set that way. “It holds because we hold it. That’s the whole secret. There isn’t another one.”

Simon almost said something. Daniel watched him almost say it — watched the door swing halfway, the old hope reach for the handle — and then the boy shrugged, the shrug that shut it again, and said, “Or it holds until somebody decides it doesn’t,” and left.

Daniel sat a while in the emptying room. Then he opened the composition book and made the day’s entry in pencil, accurate, correctable, and under the count, which he did not change because nothing had changed the count, he wrote a single line, and looked at it, and did not erase it.

*Rumor re: Schedule L. No memo.*

### Three — Whatever Surface Is Nearby

The marker had no business still being in his pocket. Theo Alcántara had not taught in two years and the marker was a classroom marker, a dry-erase, the fat kind that squeaked, and he had carried it out of Room 14 on his last day the way you carry a thing you have not decided to keep, in the jacket, forgotten, and then found again, and then — this was the part he did not examine too closely — kept on purpose, replacing it when it ran dry, buying the same brand, so that what had started as an accident had become, without his permission, a habit, and the habit had become a small daily lie he told himself, which was that he was still, in some way that counted, a teacher.

He used it to write agendas on whatever surface was nearby. This was the practical excuse, and it was even true. Tonight the surface was the inside of a pizza box lid, flattened, grease-translucent in one corner, propped against the coffee urn at the front of the room in the basement of the Reformed church on Delancey that let Commons Watch meet there on Thursdays for the cost of leaving the place cleaner than they found it. He wrote three things on the lid in his squeaking hand. He wrote SCHOOLS. He wrote WHO'S NEW. He wrote, because Ana had told him to and because she was right, COFFEE \$ — SIGN UP, and underlined it twice, because the chapter ran on nine dollars a week in coffee money and nobody wanted to be the one to collect it, least of all Theo, who would rather knock on forty doors than ask one person for a dollar to their face.

Eleven people. He counted them the way he had once counted a class coming in from recess, not out of suspicion but out of care, the headcount that is really a form of love: are you all here, did I lose anyone, is everyone accounted for. Eleven, on a Thursday, in the first year, which was not bad, which was in fact seven more than the winter before the election, and Theo let himself feel that for exactly as long as it took to set out the folding chairs, and then he put it away, because a man

who lets himself feel good about eleven is a man who will feel bad about nine, and nine was coming, nine always came, and you could not run a movement on a number's approval or it would leave you the first cold week it dipped.

They were good people and they were the people who came, which were not always the same set, and Theo had made his peace with that too. There was Gloria, who was seventy and had been doing this since before it was called this, since before most of the acronyms, and who could be counted on to say the uncomfortable true thing about eight minutes into any conversation that had gotten comfortable. There was the Reyes boy, not a boy, twenty-six, who took the minutes on a laptop and would inherit the chapter someday if there was a chapter to inherit and if the world let him grow into the patience the job required, which was a great deal of patience, more than Theo had had at twenty-six, more than Theo some nights had now. And there was, tonight, at the back, near the stairs, a man Theo did not know.

He clocked him like he clocked everyone new, which was warmly and without pressure, a nod, a we're-glad-you're-here that asked nothing back. Fifties, a chore coat, a cap he did not take off, arms crossed but not hostile — crossed like a man who is not sure he is welcome and has decided to find out. He had come on his own. That was the thing Theo noticed and filed. Nobody had brought him. He had seen something, or heard something, or been frightened by something, and had looked up where the people who were worried about it met, and had come down alone into a church basement full of strangers on a Thursday night, which took a kind of courage that the eleven regulars had mostly spent long ago and no longer remembered costing anything.

"We'll start in a couple minutes," Theo told the room, and to the man in the cap, quietly, in passing, like you'd say it to anyone: "Coffee's real. Cookies are from a box but they're the good box."

The man almost smiled. Didn't. Nodded.

The meeting was the meeting. Theo had run a hundred of them and this was the truth he never said out loud at the trainings, where they taught you facilitation like it was a technology: most of a meeting is just letting people be in a room together and feel less alone about a thing, and

the agenda is mostly an excuse for the room. They talked about the schools. That was the SCHOOLS on the pizza lid — the funding, the letters some parents had gotten and others hadn't, the thing that was either a routine budget scare or the front edge of something, and nobody in the room knew which, and Theo would not pretend to. He had taught at Halstead Commons for six years — fifth grade for five of them, and a year of third at the end, when the first funding shuffle collapsed two sections and moved him down the hall. He knew what those buildings held and what it would mean to hollow them, and he knew, too, the way you know the weather changing in your bad knee, that the letters were not routine. But knowing and being able to prove were different countries, and Commons Watch lived or died on the border between them, and Theo's whole job, most nights, was to keep people standing at that border without letting them either lie down or run across.

It was Gloria, at minute eight or so, who said the uncomfortable true thing.

"We're all the same eleven people," she said. "I love us. But we're going to lose this if it's just us. It's going to have to be people who don't already agree with everything we say."

And there it was, the whole argument, the one Theo would be having in one form or another for the next four years, laid on the table by a seventy-year-old woman who had earned the right to skip the preamble. Because the eleven were the eleven for a reason — they were the ones who already believed, and believing was comfortable, and a room of believers is a warm room and a small one. And the man in the cap by the stairs was not one of the eleven. He might not agree with them about six other things. He might, Theo thought, watching him, have voted the way that had brought all of this on, and come down these stairs anyway because whatever was happening had finally reached far enough into his own life to override the team colors. And the question — Gloria's question, the whole question — was whether Commons Watch was a place for the eleven to be right together, or a place big enough and rough enough and imperfect enough to hold the man in the cap too, cap and crossed arms and voting record and all.

Theo believed he knew the answer. He also knew that believing you know the answer to that question is the easiest thing in the world at a meeting and the hardest thing in the world at eleven at night when the man in the cap has said something that lands wrong and half your regulars are looking at you to see whether you'll let it stand. So he did not give a speech. He said, "Say more about that," to Gloria, and let the room have it for a while, and watched the man in the cap listen, and near the end the man unfolded his arms to take a cookie, which Theo counted, privately, the way he counted everything, as a win of the only size that was ever actually available.

Ana was up when he got home, which she should not have been, because she had morning duty and the drive, and he stood in the kitchen doorway and looked at her at the table with her tea gone cold and her school clothes already laid out over the chair for the morning, and he loved her so much in that moment that it came out, the way it did with him, as an apology.

"You didn't have to wait up."

"I wasn't waiting up. I was up." She said it lightly, which was the mercy, because they both knew it wasn't true, and the lie was a kind of gift, a thing she handed him so he wouldn't have to carry the fact of it. She'd stayed at Halstead when he left it. Still taught the fifth grade he used to teach, in a building two funding letters away from whatever the man in the cap was afraid of, and she came home every day tired in the specific bearable way of a person who had spent herself on one classroom of one school, thirty faces, a scale a body could hold — while he came home tired in the other way, the way with no bottom to it, spent on everything and everyone and the whole shape of the thing, a hunger you could not fill because it was not, in the end, a hunger for anything a day's work could produce.

"Eleven tonight," he said, because she would want the number, because she always wanted the number, and hated herself a little for wanting it, because she was better than metrics and she knew it and wanted the number anyway.

"Eleven's good."

“Eleven’s good,” he agreed, and did not say the rest, the nine that was coming, the man in the cap, Gloria’s question, the marker in his pocket that meant he was still pretending. He came and sat down across from her and she pushed the cold tea at him and he drank it because it was hers, and for a minute the kitchen was just the kitchen, two people who believed the same things sitting in the small warm circle of a lamp, and the thing about that circle, the thing Theo knew and would spend the next four years learning again the hard way, was that it was the actual thing being defended. Not an intermission from the work. The work’s whole point. He just kept forgetting to stay inside it.

“Come to bed,” Ana said. “The church basement will still be there.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” he said, and she laughed, and it was a good laugh, tired and real, and he capped the marker in his pocket without taking it out, a habit, and followed the person he loved down the hall.

## The Federal Beat

Subcomm markup — Approps, Rm. 2141. 9:40.

*They gave me this beat the way you give a man a desk by the bathroom.*

Chair (R) gaveled 9:41. Gone by 9:44 — “prior commitment.” Left the freshman to run it.

*Six years. Not a firing, nobody fires you, they just —*

“— consistent with the Steward’s direction on —” (didn’t finish. nobody made him.)

*write that down, the not-finishing, the way he let it trail and the room let him. that’s the story now, the trailing off. used to be the beat where nothing —*

Vote 7–4. Voice. No roll call requested.

*no roll call. so no record of who. ask R. Hollis re: why the minority didn’t force it. Hollis owes me from the — from Tarrant. from the thing in Tarrant. God, Tarrant, is Della still — no. focus.*

Number moved \$2.1B. Twenty minutes.

*used to take four hours to not move a dollar. filed six inches, ran B14, my editor said good and meant it because good meant nobody called. you could set your watch by the nothing.*

CHECK: is 2141 the same room as the ’19 hearing? think it is. same bad chairs.

*same bad chairs. I sat in one of those chairs the year I — the year everything, the year Doug and I signed the — no. the chairs. the point is the chairs are the same and the room is the same and the twenty minutes is not the same, twenty minutes changed everything, and I have no clever line for that, which is why it’s the only part I wrote clean.*

Paper only. Phone stays in the bag.

*doesn’t sync. doesn’t answer to anyone. doesn’t get the little gray check when someone’s read it. never once phones home. you can burn paper, which is a —*

Follow: Hollis. minority strategy. the \$2.1B — where it lands.

— *comfort. I'm not going to write down why I stopped keeping this on the phone. that's sort of the*

Federal beat. Six years.

*best seat in the house now. and I'd give a great deal to have the nothing back.*