

BORN
to **RUN**

A note from the publisher

Dear Reader,

If you enjoy riveting stories with engaging characters and strong writing as I do, you'll love *Born to Run*. It's an edge-of-your-seat political thriller, action packed with terrorism... treason... and murder. It follows a nation's desire for Isabel Diaz to be the first Hispanic and female president... but can she win? And should she? I couldn't put it down... *Born to Run* is a gripping read. *Born to Run* is John's second novel.

Did you know that big-name authors, John Grisham and J.K. Rowling, were rejected many times by publishers? John Green's own experience of this was one of the many factors that inspired *Pantera Press*, and our aim to become *a great new home for Australia's next generation of best-loved authors*. We think we're well on our way.

But there's even more to us... Simply by enjoying our books, you'll also be contributing to our unique approach: *good books doing good things*TM. We have a strong 'profits for philanthropy' foundation, focussed on literacy, quality writing, the joys of reading and fostering debate.

So let me mention one program we're thrilled to support: *Let's Read*. It's already helping 100,000 pre-schoolers across Australia develop a love of books and the building blocks for learning how to read and write. We're excited that *Let's Read* now also operates in remote Indigenous communities in Far North Queensland, Cape York and Torres Strait. *Let's Read* was developed by the *Centre for Community Child Health* and it's being implemented in partnership with *The Smith Family*.

Simply buying this book will help us support these kids. Thank you.

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Please enjoy *Born to Run*.

And for news about our other books, sample chapters, author interviews and much more, please visit our website: www.PanteraPress.com

Happy reading,

Alison Green

BORN *to* RUN



JOHN M. GREEN





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To my three amigos

“When I was a boy I was told that anybody could become president. I’m beginning to believe it.”

— *Clarence Darrow, defence attorney and writer (1857–1938)*

“Can a woman be president of the United States?
At present the answer is emphatically ‘No’.”

— *Eleanor Roosevelt, “Women in Politics”*
(Good Housekeeping, 1940)

“Yes, absolutely. I think, you know, because why not?”

— *Arnold Schwarzenegger on allowing foreign-born Americans to run for president (60 Minutes, 2004)*

“The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots & tyrants.”

— *Thomas Jefferson (1787)*

THE FINISH LINE...

FOR ONCE, HILLARY Clinton and Sarah Palin are in synch, privately spitting their venom at the cloying barrage of TV images that show a beaming Isabel Diaz sprinkling her pixie dust. Even their own supporters, in a distressing groundswell these two political foes once craved for themselves, are leaping to their feet across the country, punching the air and chanting “Bel... Bel... Isa-bel.”

As the race to win the White House hurtles into its final straight, candidate Isabel Diaz streaks lengths ahead. “She’s not only smart, personable and visionary, she’s got an impressive record of accomplishment,” says *The New York Times*. “The nation, and the world, will be well-served if this woman occupies the Oval Office.”

Diaz’s well-chronicled slog to success is tunnelling her deep into the nation’s psyche, making it very tough for her opponents. It’s hardly wise politics to slam a minority woman who crawled out of a rank pit of poverty, alcohol and violence to emerge as the big-hearted owner of an admired family restaurant chain, and an active philanthropist to boot. What little mud her rivals have been able to dig up and toss at her isn’t sticking.

It’s true that some see her as too good to be true, but for

most, in a nation deflated after so many pumped up promises of change, Isabel Diaz offers a credible breath of fresh air.

On policy, not only has she won over the Democratic heartland for her stance on moral issues, offers of relief for the middle class, and her doable list of programs of leg-ups for the underdog, but the Tea Party also loves her for promising low taxes, small government and family values. Her running mate, the more traditionally conservative Hank Clemens who hails from North Carolina, helps her shore up the religious right.

The media are chorusing that Isabel Diaz is a shoo-in, and that her rival Robert (Bobby) J. Foster is outfoxed and outpaced.

Buoyed for weeks with a 70-percent approval rating—higher than the rapture for Barack Obama at his peak—the presidency is within Isabel's grasp.

And deep behind the scenes, a shadowy circle of zealots is conspiring to guarantee just that.

1

JAX MASON HAD heard of Isabel Diaz. Who *didn't* know about the famous Burger Queen? But the twenty-five-year-old Australian had no clue he was about to sacrifice his life for her.

Bent over tying his laces, his shoe on his skateboard and his fringe flopped over his glasses, he heard the elevator ping and, at 5 AM, he thought it had to be the night guard doing his final rounds. Jax looked up, expecting that at any second the doors would slide open on the old guy's barrel stomach and customary can of Pepsi Max.

Though Jax was currently visiting London from New York, where he rented an apartment, he really lived on the internet. He was a prolific contributor to WikiLeaks (though he'd never actually met Julian Assange), as well as Anonymous and various conspiracy theory sites. His thick Coke-bottle glasses exaggerated his nerdiness and helped him suit the label of the typical young math genius, though it was called maths where he was born, in Melbourne. His straggly brown hair was so greasy it looked black even in a good light, and his pasty skin was proof he was a night-owl, especially with his skateboarding. Neither travel nor late nights troubled him. Jax was not big on mixing with other people and even dismissed

“social networking” as an ironic misnomer. His computer was his closest companion, closely followed by his skateboard. The only thing neat about him was his beard, a slightly ginger mouse-tail that made him look as though an amber exclamation mark was pointing under his lip.

If the Silicon Valley environmental software firm that had flown him to the UK had bothered with a face-to-face interview, they would have had second thoughts. Instead, they hired him on the strength of a single phone call after hearing of his reputation from his PhD work, even though it was unfinished. He’d dumped Princeton University and skipped to New York as a contractor, mainly so he could work on his pet project away from the prying eyes of deceitful supervisors. Like the creep Jax had overheard in the hallway mocking his stutter.

His current employers had installed their patented software for running the environmental features of a new five-star-rated building at Canary Wharf, London’s modern financial district, but due to a serious systems glitch the local authorities were refusing to hand over their completion certificate so none of the tenants could move in. Jax was over here to fix it. “Don’t leave the building till it’s done,” was his simple brief, but it was one he ignored daily, stealing a few hours here and there to take in the sights since he hadn’t been to London before.

He flicked back his hair but, from out here on the terrace across the empty blacked-out floor, all he could make out was the elevator’s flashing “14”. He squinted, and when the doors shushed open, two occupants stepped out, not one. With the light behind them, he couldn’t glimpse their faces but neither of their body shapes was anything like the nightwatchman’s. Jax’s smile dropped, sending a glint of reflected moonlight from his lenses to the visitors.

“Jax Mason, is that you over there?”

She was British, Jax decided, hardly surprised. He couldn’t make out the badge she seemed to be waving in front of

her, but her confident strides toward him and her stubby companion's menacing swagger instantly made Jax's skin crawl, and his head suddenly squirmed with the thought that 14th floors were usually 13ths.

A frosty wind blew up from the River Thames two hundred feet below, though he wondered if it was nerves.

"Jax Mason?" she insisted.

"Yeah, that's m-me. Y-you?" Jax tried to calm the anxiety trembling out of him. He stammered at the best of times, though this didn't seem like one of them. He took her hand, but her sneer suggested he should have gripped it harder, or maybe first wiped the sweat off his own hand on his jeans. She was an eyeful, for sure, but that only increased Jax's edginess. He wasn't good around women. Or men. But especially women.

"I'm Diana Hunter," she lied and, tilting her head toward her slightly hunch-backed colleague, continued, "And this is Lucky."

Even in this dim light, Jax noted that Lucky's face looked like he shaved with a chisel, possibly why he had the chipped front tooth.

"We're MI6," Diana explained, brushing back a strand of her blonde hair, but not so far back that Jax could have guessed it was a wig, even in good light.

2

MI6 WAS THE UK's secret intelligence service; Jax knew that. When he'd goofed off on a River Thames tourist cruise three days earlier, the loudspeaker commentary had specifically pointed out MI6's building. Some secret service, he'd smirked at the time.

As Diana kept a grip on Jax's hand, her piercing brown eyes bored into him so long he noticed that one of her contact lenses was askew. If the lights had been on, he might have detected that her real eye-colour was blue.

He coughed as an excuse to remove his hand from hers. "Like, wh-what do you guys want?" he stuttered, mainly out of habit and not entirely from fear. Where, Jax sweated, was actor Geoffrey Rush when he needed him, or better than Rush, a real speech therapist?

"Mr Mason. Recently you posted a blog about your subway shockwave simulation." Jax had posted several blogs on the web about his intricate computer model, boasting it was mathematical proof that terrorists could build up and hurtle a shockwave through a city's subway system that was so ferocious it could suck down and destroy the entire metropolis above it. All they needed to know was precisely on which platforms to set off a hair-trigger-timed series of relatively small explosions.

As Jax gripped the terrace railing, the cold metal drew the remaining heat out of him. Months ago, he had contacted the US government about his computer model, a radical step for an anarchist like him. But Homeland Security flicked him straight into crackpot corner. He tried to tell them: if Jax Mason working alone could create something like this, what could more malign parties do? But if the US government wouldn't listen, why was MI6 popping up out of the blue?

As if she could read his mind, Diana answered his question, "The Prime Minister is acutely sensitive after the bombings over here. He wants you to help us design baffles for London's Tube to prevent one of these shockwaves. For a considerable retainer, of course."

They were going to pay him? Working for the government? Normally that would be against his principles, but this wasn't his government, nor even his adopted government... and then there was the money.

He shifted his gaze from Diana to the other spook, but only for a second, chilled by the stare penetrating him from Lucky's pencil-points. Lucky usually didn't say much, words not being his preferred tools of persuasion. While Jax didn't know that, he somehow sensed that any hand big enough to crush his skull by itself would do Lucky's speaking for him.

"I'm s-sort of busy. I'm here on a j-job," Jax muttered, looking at his shoes and reminding himself he had been about to tie his lace.

"Six hours ago," said Diana, shaking her head slowly, "we intercepted an encrypted satellite communication and only finished unscrambling it an hour ago. The point, sir, is that you are in immediate danger—from a terrorist cell here in London. We are not the only ones seeking your simulation model. We know these other people, Mr Mason, and they are not the types to let anything, or anyone, stand in their way. We need to get you, and your model, to safety. Now."

That she whispered this only made Jax jumpier. “How l-long we g-got?” he said, not that he had a hectic day of meetings to reschedule.

Without answering, she pulled him inside, off the terrace. “Mr Mason. May I call you Jax?”

He nodded dumbly.

“Jax. Your software program? The simulation? Before we leave here, we must isolate and protect all copies in existence. We have people on standby.”

“Over th-ere,” he said.

Her eyes followed his to where his laptop was on the floor, next to his backpack. “Show me,” she said, guiding him over to it.

Jax sat cross-legged in front of the screen, and she gripped his shoulder. On-screen, he clicked an icon and a menu popped up offering three choices: London, New York City and Washington.

“Trash it.”

He did.

“How many other copies are there?”

Jax hesitated, but her grip tightened.

“There’s o-one in my b-backpack.”

After ferreting inside the bag, Lucky handed a DVD box to Jax, who flicked through them and pulled out the relevant disk.

“Any others?”

Jax slowly shook his head and, as his situation sank in, so did the rest of his body.

“Jax! Surely, you’ve got a backup at home or on a server somewhere?”

He shook his head harder.

“Why don’t I believe you?” She held the disk up under his nose, cutting its edge into his septum until Jax’s tongue tasted the sharp copper tang of a drizzle of his own blood.

“Mr Mason. Very bad people want this, and they’re on their way here. Right now. Unless you cooperate, immediately, millions could die. Our government can’t permit that.”

Diana watched Lucky loom up behind Jax. From the broken half-smile on his face she knew he’d enjoy this quivering wreck.

“Jax,” she reasoned, “think about it. If *we* found you, so will they...” She shifted her feet and nodded to Lucky whose own paw started to clamp onto Jax’s shoulder. He lent down and curled his left arm around Jax from behind, digging into his solar plexus until Jax bent forward, dry-retching.

Lucky released his grip and Jax, still twisted over, grunted, “I’ll sh-show you.” He quickly located the remote server and pulled up the program.

Diana knelt, her face close to his. She loved this work. Her cheeks were translucent, pearl-like, shimmering with a light tingly sheen, not that Jax noticed. What he did notice, lit up by his screen, were the soft pads covering each of Diana’s fingertips and a wisp of red hair creeping out from under her wig.

“Trash it,” she barked, giving him no time to freak over why someone claiming to be on his side needed to mask her fingerprints or her hair. He did as she demanded, careful not to press the wrong keys.

“Now, Jax. Last time I’ll ask. The other copies? Where are they? All of them.”

He looked at her blankly, but Lucky leant over again and burnt his breath into Jax’s ear.

“There’s j-just one,” said Jax. “In my a-p-partment... in New Y-York.” He explained it was taped inside the toilet cistern in his bathroom, in a waterproof Ziploc bag.

Lucky slipped a phone from his pocket and keyed in a number. Jax watched him walk toward the windows, the phone lighting up one side of his unyielding face.

All Jax could make out of Lucky's conversation were two words: "TriBeCa" and "john." Feeling like he was swirling in as much shit as a cesspool duck, he didn't focus on the fact that in London toilets weren't called "johns" or that he hadn't yet mentioned his New York address, which was indeed in TriBeCa.

3

FUND-RAISING IS always centre-stage for presidential election campaigns, but with Isabel Diaz it was different. Not because she was personally worth a fortune, but more due to her struggle to achieve it.

She cast her eyes around the glitzy crowd—four hundred black tuxedos and an equal number of sparkly cocktail dresses—and mentally ticked off the tally: nearly \$2 million raised, just tonight.

Her eyes settled briefly at Table Four, where her campaign director was staring at her, quietly fuming. He'd obviously done the calculations too. "Every dollar you pull in for Triple-B is one less for the campaign," Gregory Samson had whined to her earlier in the evening. And he ran the same script at last week's fundraiser, and last month's.

But to Isabel this wasn't a zero-sum game. Running for president certainly gave her foundation a boost, but it was hardly to her campaign's detriment, as she'd insisted countless times to Gregory, reminding him that it wasn't just her policies that had shot her popularity to record levels, nor even his masterful campaign strategies. It was also her rags-to-riches success story and the philanthropy it had inspired: her charitable foundation for runaway kids.

A Triple-B graduate always delivered the after-dinner speech at these events, and as Mary Dimitri drove to her emotive conclusion up at the lectern, Isabel guessed tonight's might possibly squeeze out an extra half-million in donations.

"Without Triple-B," said Mary, her dark eyes scanning the crowd, "I wouldn't be here tonight. I wouldn't be a pediatrician either. Simply, I'd be dead... from drugs, from disease, from a bullet."

A hush smothered the crowd as they tried to absorb what she'd just said.

"But Triple-B is not just a get-out-of-jail card," she continued. "It's not just counselling or financial support through college and med school. As you've heard tonight, it's also Isabel Diaz. She is an extraordinary role model, a runaway herself who through hard work achieved so much yet is giving, and has already given, so much back. Ladies and gentlemen, your generosity tonight will help Triple-B continue this amazing woman's work and get even more kids off the streets and into productive lives. Like mine. And like hers."

As Isabel mouthed Mary a thankyou from her table just below the lectern, a yawn insisted itself on her and she quickly covered it with her table napkin. The months of relentless campaigning day and night were catching up.

Tonight, she'd spent the entire evening conjuring up her stock of old-style diner service tricks. Pasting on her best smile, she'd popped around to most of the taffeta pink tables, thanking as many of the guests as she could for coming, lightly touching an arm, pressing a bejewelled hand, squeezing a shoulder or just picking lint off it as a dear friend would. Flattery worked when raising money, especially if it came from someone who could be sitting in the Oval Office in a few short months.

No matter how beat she was, she knew she'd keep the formula going right up to the finale. She pushed back her chair to continue her rounds, and as she straightened out the

wrinkles in her snug black sequined dress, the band struck up *Bésame Mucho*, stupidly dedicating the old favourite to her.

It was a bad omen.

A few minutes later, only two tables away, a waiter tripped on a diamante-studded handbag strap and crashed a tray of wine glasses to the floor. Isabel was mid-sentence with a stockbroker when she heard the glass shattering behind her. And with her being so tired... and with that damn song playing... the darkness started flooding back.

Gripping the back of a chair, she tried to stop herself swaying, and struggled to visualise her father's photo. His face... his calming eyes... his...

"You okay?" the broker asked, concerned and reaching for a glass of water to give her.

"I'm sorry," she said, blinking open her eyes. "It's a... a sudden migraine," she lied, and rushed for the ladies room to wait out her ghosts.



ISABEL was hunched over in the toilet stall pressing a wet napkin against her eyes. Her other hand was flicking nervously at the old scar that crossed her throat.

At her feet was an empty *Clip'n'Drip* pack. Thank God for her husband Ed's miracle drug delivery device, she thought yet again. The brilliant, under-skin implant always kicked in the relaxant much faster than any pill or liquid could, and it was less risky than a syringe, which would really get people talking if anyone saw it. Sure, *Clip'n'Drip* hadn't yet got government approval, so this was her and Ed's little secret. Or one of them.

So far, no one had seriously objected that she suffered occasional migraines. The research helped. It wasn't just the 25 percent of women who got them at least once, yet still lived a normal life. It was more Napoleon, Julius Caesar, Thomas

Jefferson, both Robert E. Lee *and* Ulysses S. Grant, and John F. Kennedy... all extraordinary leaders, despite their migraines. If they could, so could she.

Even if hers weren't really migraines at all.

Fortunately, glass didn't shatter around her too often in public places, though she always carried several *Clip'n'Drips* in her purse just in case. But tonight, with her being so dog-tired her normally strong resistance was low, and the sound of the smash had shot deep, like a shard of memory shrapnel.

Years ago she had seen a shrink, but the treatment didn't do much for her and she backed off when she started thinking about going into politics, worried that her depressive tendencies could kill her chances stone cold if they leaked out. Instead, she taught herself some quick-acting meditation tricks which usually worked but, when they didn't like tonight, a private jab from a *Clip'n'Drip* did the job.

The episodes were monotonously the same... if horror could ever be monotonous... *She is back in the grim trailer her mother rented...*

Isabel had long suspected her mother paid their rent by offering "favours", though it took two decades to admit that tasteless morsel of her family history to herself. And she'd never revealed it to anyone else; not even to her husband.

Ed Loane knew about the rape, though only the fact, not the details. Before they married, she had confided that it was why she could never have kids. He also knew about her dad's photo and how much comfort she got from it, since it sat on her bedside table no matter where she was. But he knew little about her mother; only that she'd been poor, a widow and Bolivian.

Isabel had never quite grasped why her mother soaked her once sweet soul with that sleazy swamp of "boyfriends" and bottles. Poverty was an easy yet unsatisfactory answer since most of Isabel's trailer-park friends' mothers, even the single

ones, lived quite differently. None of them had Isabel's daily chore of tidying up and stacking their mother's empties outside, flanking their trailer like a glass wailing wall, a kaleidoscope stabbing green, bronze and yellow-white needles into her sad green eyes. It drove Isabel's determination that never, ever would she be her mother's daughter. For starters, she didn't touch alcohol.

4

ISABEL'S HEAD FINALLY hit her hotel pillow. It was close to midnight in Chicago, especially late since she always got up at 5 AM local time, no matter what. Waking early was ingrained, a habit from years of working the breakfast and every other shift. But it wasn't just that; the memories that washed over her every morning were a refreshing ritual she liked to take time over. Whether they were to remind her of who she really was, or because she couldn't forget, she could never fathom.

BY the time she had arrived at Half Moon Bay as a broken fifteen-year-old, the roadhouse diner's once bold, optimistic paisley swirls had been washed out by the torpor of year after harsh year of the Californian sun and the flagging energy of the couple who "ran" the place, Annette and George Hicks.

Originally called Big Bad Burgers, later rechristened by her as BBB, the restaurant was a tottering pillar of the second law of thermodynamics, the rule of inevitable decay that her physics teacher had once explained was why iron rusts and old eggs stink. But to Isabel, then so fragile, this tawdry diner was paradise.

The air had been languid that day, she recalled, so thick she could still lick it. The morning hung as lazily as the brown

pelicans drifting on the bay's flat waters. A straggle of flies lurked around the plastic doorway ribbons, once a rainbow but now so drab and limp they couldn't even pretend to defend the entrance.

Isabel had prodded the door open with her walking cane. The sticky odour the flies had been soaking up glugged over her, sour though not quite rancid, like fat that had fried too many tomatoes. Yet strangely, even that had welcomed her.

The battered girl didn't know it then, nor did the Hickses, but their shabby 24-seat Cabrillo Highway ex-speakeasy would be the seed of the successful nationwide chain that the three of them, though mostly Isabel, would build up and sell almost thirty years later, reaping a fortune of over a quarter of a billion dollars.

A few days earlier, the old spinster sharing her hospital room had winkled out of Isabel her unspeakable story and, with the girl only just walking again, the long-retired librarian slapped a Greyhound bus ticket and fifty dollars into her shaky hand, urging her to flee as far away as she could, even with her limp and her cane.

Isabel had bussed west from New Mexico, not caring where she was headed so long as the Cactus Flower Trailer Park and her mami's sleazy boyfriends, especially that one with the wolf tattoo... and the broken bottle... shrank deep into distant memory.

THE white sheet pulled away from Isabel's olive skin as she leant over to the bedside table and wondered what the public or the media would say if they knew. "*Candidate Wacko – keeps shrine to dead dad on nightstand,*" popped into her head before she could dismiss it.

Her husband Ed accepted it. War veterans had their own sacraments to the past and respected others for theirs, no matter how weird. George Hicks, effectively her adoptive father, he knew. His wife Annette also, but she was long gone.

Slotted behind scratched glass inside its battered tin frame, the glossy print was possibly the most travelled photo in the country. The zip pocket in her leather satchel protected it, keeping it in much the same condition as when she'd swiped it out of her mother's bedside table drawer. She could easily have replaced the frame or the glass as Ed had suggested many times, but that would have been a sacrilege. This was her greatest treasure, despite all her wealth. It was her only physical memento of the man who had kissed her only in her dreams: her long-dead father.

Without needing to look, though she did, she knew every striking contour of her father's face and cherished the differences from her own as much as the similarities. Was he tall, as she was? From this head-shot there was no way to know, but her mother had filled in the blanks, holding her hand way above her own short head, saying he towered above her "*like a Bolivian jacaranda.*" Perhaps that was where Isabel had got her own five-foot-ten. His charisma was "*as vivid as clusters of lilac blossoms*" of the same native tree. Maybe, Isabel wondered, she'd inherited her people skills from him; her mother's were certainly nothing to emulate. She briefly shuddered just thinking about her. Though the photo was black-and-white, it lent her father's skin a moody tone, which long ago she decided meant it was olive, surely, and velvety. Just like hers. And when she touched her own cheek, as she did now, she sometimes imagined it was his.

Hernandes Diaz. She loved the ring and the metre of his name, how the syllables and the Ds tapped out on her tongue. She could even smell the Brylcreem on the comb he would have brushed his shiny black hair back off his forehead with, hair blacker and thicker than her own very practical bob.

His bedroom eyes, black and soulful, locked right onto hers as though she were the only person in his gaze. Since

her mother's eyes were brown, Isabel had always been curious about why her own were green.

Hernandes had died just before she was born so he never laid those eyes on her.

Of course, he never saw her scar, either. Thankfully. Her finger traced itself along the familiar track across her neck. She couldn't help it. Often, just visualising this photograph helped Isabel fend off her dark spells... and if it didn't, she always had what was in her purse.