



POWERLESS

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

MARGARET MCHEYZER

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POWERLESS

Before he was the president, he was a man who'd do anything for love...

Kathryn:

My mom's decided I have a long-term plan.

Graduate from high school, be accepted into Stanford to study financial analytics, and get a secure job that pays well.

However, I've moved to a new high school and find myself actively avoiding distractions, like Bennett Adams, because falling in love isn't part of my immediate future.

Until he is.

Bennett:

My life has been mapped out for me, and I'm completely fine with that.

I'm following in my father's and grandfather's footsteps to become a senator. It's what I want.

My parents have decided that I'm going to marry Jennifer Marshall. She comes from impeccable breeding, and we all know politics is about perception. With our union, there'd be no stopping me and how far I can go. Together, we'd be a mega-powerhouse.

But there's one problem.

The moment I saw Kathryn, I knew I was going to marry her. There's not one doubt in my mind that she's going to become mine.

I just need to figure out how I can be with Kathryn... *without revealing Jennifer's secret.*

***Powerless is a full-length prequel to Power. May contain triggers for some.**

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Also by Margaret McHeyzer

I'm forever grateful to you for reading my book.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you

Margaret

xx

PART I

HOW IT ALL BEGAN.

PROLOGUE

BENNETT

“She’s cute,” I say to Liam as we sit in class.

“She’s not your usual type.”

I flash him a look and raise my brows. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You like them blonde and wide-eyed. She’s not blonde.” He pointedly looks toward the hot chick who just walked into our class. “She looks way out of your league,” my best friend teases.

The beautiful, dark-haired girl looks around the class and catches me staring at her. She offers me a timid smile before turning to face forward. There’s something special about her. She has this amazingly elegant way that she walks and stands. Even her hair is sophisticated in the way it cascades down over her shoulders. She’s not dressed like the other girls; she’s stylish yet classy. “I’m going to marry her,” I say as I keep my eyes glued to the long-haired beauty.

She sneaks a look over her shoulder toward me, and my heart thumps with a ferocious need to have her.

“You? Get married?” Liam jokes. “Besides, your parents have other plans for you.”

“I couldn’t care less what they want.” My jaw clenches as I turn to face Liam.

“Well...” Liam screws his mouth up as he glances toward the girl. “All I’ll say is good luck with them, buddy.” He lifts his hand and places it on my shoulder, giving it a squeeze. “What kind of flowers do you want for your funeral?”

“Smart-ass.” I flick his hand off my shoulder before turning toward the front when our teacher enters the room.

But in truth, the girl with the long, brown hair has my undivided attention.

— * —

“So, you’re new?” Justine asks my future wife. I hurry to catch up to them before they get away.

“Hey, Justine,” I say.

The girls are heading out of class, and I’ve left Liam behind so I can use Justine as a buffer. This is the perfect opportunity to find out who *she* is.

“Oh, hey, Bennett.” Justine smiles up at me. “This is…” Justine pauses and turns toward the new girl. “I’m sorry, I don’t know your name.”

“I’m Kathryn.” Even her voice is smooth and luscious.

I hold my hand out to hers as we’re walking through the halls. “Bennett,” I say.

“I know,” she quips with a smirk and a raised eyebrow.

“Have you just moved here?” Justine asks.

“Mom was transferred, so we moved.”

“Army brat?” I ask.

“No,” Kathryn chuckles. “Mom’s a banker and she got a promotion.” Her shoulders tighten against the barrage of questions.

“That’s cool,” Justine says. “A woman in power. I like that.” Justine digs her phone out of her pocket and lifts it to her ear as she pulls away from Kathryn and me.

“There’s a party this weekend,” I say, “and I was wondering if you’d like to come with me.”

Kathryn scrunches her nose and shakes her head. “I’m not the partying type, so that’s a ‘no’ from me.”

“How about we catch a movie?”

Kathryn takes a sharp breath and lowers her chin. “Look,” she starts as she raises her head to stare into my eyes. *Damn, she’s breathtaking.* “I’m not interested in anything you have to offer.”

“Why?” I ask, nonplussed.

She chuckles as she tucks her hair behind her ear. “I’m here to get an

education, that's it. I'm not interested in partying, or..." Kathryn lifts her hand and gestures toward me. "... a boyfriend. I have plans, and men aren't part of those plans." She offers me a consoling smile. "Sorry."

"You can never have too many friends." I just want to be close to her, in any capacity.

Kathryn looks over to the side where Justine is still on the phone. "Don't feel bad, Bennett. But you're not my future." She takes another breath and steps backward. "You're probably a good guy, but..." She shakes her head and lifts her shoulders. "I'm not interested."

I place my hand to my chest. "You wound me," I say as I watch her retreat.

Kathryn smirks and replies, "You'll get over it."

Damn. I'm going to marry that girl.

BENNETT

I t's been three months, and I still can't get Kathryn out of my head. She refuses every one of my offerings. No movies, no dinner, no *anything*, and she's driving me crazy.

"Are you okay?" Mom asks as I stare at my plate and play with my steak and vegetables.

"Huh?" I look up to meet Mom's eyes.

"Pardon," Dad corrects with a stern tone.

"Pardon?" I spear a piece of potato as my thoughts return to Kathryn.

"Is there something wrong with dinner?"

"No, it's good." I look over to Mom and smile. "Thank you."

"Bennett," Mom says in a more serious tone. I lay my flatware on the side of the plate and give Mom my attention. "Your father and I have something to discuss with you."

Dad's rigid posture tells me this isn't going to be good. "Son," Dad starts. *Oh no.* "Jennifer Marshall is celebrating her eighteenth birthday this Saturday."

I wait a few seconds in case Dad wants to add anything to his sentence. "That's nice," I reply slowly. "What does Jennifer have to do with me?"

Dad's jaw tightens and he shoots Mom a tight glance. "You have to start getting serious if you're going to think about a career in politics. And the first thing you have to consider is how you look to the public. With Jennifer by your side you can—"

"Wait, you want me to marry Jennifer?" I ask as I look incredulously between my parents.

"The Marshalls are good people, and her lineage is impeccable. Her

father is a senator, and her mother is a doctor. I've spoken with Caleb, and he's assured me Jennifer understands what's expected of her."

"No, that's not right," I say.

"We've talked about this, Bennett," Dad says, his voice changing from father to politician.

"That was before..." I refrain from allowing Kathryn's name to pass my lips.

"Before what?" Mom asks with curiosity.

"Nothing." I shake my head and look at my uneaten food.

"Jennifer has good breeding. She's not a party girl. She certainly won't embarrass you, and she's ready to give you children once you marry."

I hold my hand up for Dad to stop talking while I wrap my head around his ridiculous words. "I've met Jennifer only a handful of times, and you've already married us off with children? I don't know her, what if we don't have anything in common? Or worse, what if we hate each other?"

"We all have a role to play, Bennett," Mom says.

"At what expense?" I argue. "If I have to marry someone, then I'm going to marry for love. Not someone who can advance my career."

"Jennifer not only looks good on paper, but she also understands what's required to be a senator's wife."

There's a prickly feeling in my chest. "No, this isn't right."

"Son," Dad starts.

"Honey," Mom says as she reaches out to cup her hand over mine. "We have to make sacrifices if we want our best foot forward when we present you to the country. And Jennifer is part of that image."

"No." I shake my head in disbelief.

"Enough!" Dad raises his voice just as this ridiculous argument is becoming heated. "This isn't up for negotiation, Bennett. This is what must be done if you want any chance at a future in politics. Your mother and I know what's best for you, and Jennifer Marshall *is* in your future. She'll give you two children, and you'll go on to have a successful career in politics. End of discussion." Dad sits forward and continues with his dinner. "Eat."

"Screw this," I say as I jump to my feet. "I'm not marrying a girl just because you think it'll do me good. I barely know her, and I won't leap into something so monumental."

"If you want a career in politics, these are the sacrifices you need to make. If Jennifer Marshall can make them, so can you."

“Does she even know she’s been pimped out?”

“Stop being overly dramatic, Bennett.” Dad huffs with his own frustration.

“Mom.” I look to her for some kind of reason. But Mom is a politician’s wife, and she knows how to behave when things get heated. I shake my head, disappointed that Mom doesn’t tell me what she really thinks. “I’m going to my room,” I say as I leave my unfinished dinner.

“Bennett!” Dad’s bellow carries through the entire house. “Bennett!” I hear as I take the stairs two at a time heading toward my room.

I slam the door shut when I hear Dad’s roar again. “This is bullshit,” I grumble to myself as I collapse on my bed. Taking my phone out of my pocket, I start to scroll social media. But my annoyance isn’t settling. “This is fucked.” There’s a knock on the door and I glance over at it with fury before returning my attention to social media. “What?”

The door creaks open and Mom sticks her head in. “Can we talk?” she asks gently.

“Sure.” I make no attempt to move as Mom advances toward me and sits on the edge of the bed.

“Can you put the phone down and talk to me?”

“Why? You’re on *his* side, aren’t you?” I refuse to look away from my phone, although I’m not taking in anything from it. I’m too wired.

“I’m going to ask you a question, and I want an honest answer.”

I purse my lips together and take a deep breath. I lower the phone and sit up on the bed. “Okay, ask.”

“Do you want to be in politics?”

“More than anything else in the world.”

“Then you have to consider that everything you do will reflect on your future prospects. If you want to be a politician, if you want to be a senator or the governor, then every part of your life will be scrutinized. Everything. Including the woman you marry.”

“Mom, I know this. But I just turned eighteen, and I’m nearly done with high school and haven’t even started college. I’m going to Yale because that’s the college that generations of Adams men have attended. I’m doing everything you and Dad want me to do, because I trust that you know the right path for me. But...” I pinch the bridge of my nose as I shake my head. “Marrying someone because she’s right politically? That’s crazy. I’m ready to serve the people, and I know that I can’t do it alone. But if I’m with

someone I don't love, then I may as well not get married."

"That's not an option." She shakes her head. "Not being married could lead to a whole different playing field. Then the rumors might start that you're a homosexual, or God knows what else." Mom runs her hand through her hair as she straightens.

"I don't care if people think I'm gay. What I care about is finding someone to share this journey with. Someone I don't love isn't what I want." Mom takes in a sharp breath. "Could you do it?"

"That's different," she says, her voice cracking.

"Why did your voice quiver, Mom?" She lifts her chin and looks ahead. "You and Dad married because you loved each other, right?" Mom rapidly blinks as she avoids the question. "Wait," I say as I move to sit beside her. "You didn't marry Dad because you loved him?"

"Your father and I love each other a lot. *Now.*"

My lips part as I continue to stare at her. "Wow."

"We both knew what we had to do, and your father wouldn't have gone as far as he did if he hadn't married me. Being a politician means creating a united front with someone who's sturdy, and who understands what being a politician *actually* means."

"So, what? It was an arranged marriage?"

"No, it was a marriage of convenience. We both understood what we had to do, and we both did it. But as it turned out, we learned to love one another. Our start might not have been natural, but our relationship quickly became just that."

"This changes everything," I say as my shoulders sink. "I don't want to do this."

Mom stands and runs her hand down her skirt. "That's okay, Bennett. You don't have to decide right now. But think about how the American public will perceive you if you don't have a wife, or a wife who comes from inferior breeding."

"You make it sound like she's a pet."

"No, not at all. I just understand the importance of public perception."

I close my eyes as I hang my head. "Fine, I'll meet with Jennifer. But if there's no chemistry, I won't commit to a lifetime with her."

"Her birthday is this Saturday." Mom heads toward the door, stops, and turns. "You've been groomed to follow in your father's footsteps. If you don't want this, then you have to let us know now."

“Of course, I want it. But the whole arranged marriage thing is something I can do without.”

“Not if you want to be a senator.” I’ve set my sights for something a little higher.

Mom leaves my room and I’m left to think about Kathryn. It’s already over before it even started. I have to do what’s right for the American people, and stop being so damn selfish.

I lie against the bed and close my eyes.

Why can’t I have both? What’s right for the American people *and* what’s good for me?

BENNETT

“Bennett,” Mom calls from downstairs. I straighten my tie and check myself over in the mirror before leaving my room. I head downstairs to find the front door open, Dad gone, and Mom applying lipstick while looking at herself in her compact mirror. She turns to look at me and smiles. Mom quickly places her lipstick and mirror in her clutch before gifting me with her attention. “Come here.” I step forward and she makes quick work of readjusting my tie. “You look incredibly handsome, Bennett.”

“Thank you.”

“Tonight is Jennifer’s eighteenth birthday party—”

I cut her off. “I know, Mom. It’s also a way to get the ball rolling with us being a couple.”

Mom dusts off my shoulders and smiles. “That’s right.” She takes a step back and lets her eyes wander down over my body. “You look smart and composed.”

I offer Mom my elbow as I walk her out to the car where Dad’s pacing around while talking on the phone. “Mrs. Adams,” Jeffery, the driver, greets. He opens the back door and once Mom and I are in the limousine, Jeffery waits until Dad joins us before closing the door and walking to the front.

The drive to the country club where Jennifer is having her party is short and filled with an uncomfortable tension. As much as I understand the idea behind taking Jennifer as my bride, I can’t stop thinking about Kathryn. Maybe it’s best I forget Kathryn and focus on my career. But every time I close my eyes, it’s Kathryn I see standing beside me.

“Sir,” Jeffery announces when he opens the back door.

Dad slides out first, then extends his hand for Mom. Once the three of us

are out of the back of the limousine, Mom and Dad effortlessly step into media-appearance mode. They pull their shoulders back, Mom looks at Dad with such love, while Dad leads Mom into the club. I guess this is what I'll have to do too. Make sure I look put together in front of any camera.

It's all about appearances.

I button my suit jacket and follow my parents. I'm completely aware of the reporters and paparazzi hanging around, waiting to see who'll be attending Jennifer's birthday at the club.

We walk into the country club and see Caleb and Sophia Marshall. "Titus," Caleb says as he holds his hand out for my father. Caleb acknowledges my mother with a kiss to the cheek before he turns his attention to me. "Bennett, I do believe my daughter is getting herself a drink."

"Thank you, sir," I say as I sidestep my parents and make my way over toward Jennifer. She turns away from the bar just as I approach her. A tight smile tugs at her lips as she places the drink on the counter. "Happy birthday, Jennifer," I say and step in to give her a kiss on the cheek.

Her long, blonde hair cascades over her bare shoulders. Her black dress hugs her body, showing off all of her perfect curves. "Bennett." A tight smile pulls at her lips as she looks over my shoulder, then back to me. "It's nice to see you again."

"You too." Discreetly, I turn to see both sets of parents intently watching us. "You look beautiful."

Her smile is forced and fake. "Thank you."

The air between us is stale and unnatural. Does Jennifer not want this either? "Happy birthday," I say.

Jennifer's brows draw in. "Thank you, again."

"Did I already say that?"

Jennifer's shoulders relax and her tight smile morphs into a genuine one. "You did." She looks over my shoulder again, and her features tighten. "Would you care to sit?" Jennifer pointedly looks toward the tables that are set up in the event room of the country club.

"Of course." I gesture with a wave, and as she turns, I place my hand to the small of her back. This feels so robotic. I pull her chair out, then wait until she's seated before I sit beside her. "So, you've just turned eighteen."

"I have. You're eighteen too, right?"

"I am."

“And Dad has said you’ve been accepted into Yale?”

“That’s right. Yale’s where my father and grandfather attended. It’s tradition.”

“Tradition.” Jennifer lifts her brows but quickly composes herself. “Hmh,” she scoffs under her breath. I wonder what that’s about.

“And you? What college will you be attending?”

Jennifer reaches for her drink and brings it to her lips. “In an ideal world I’d like to go to UCLA, but that’s not going to happen.”

“Why? What do you want to do?”

“They offer an arts program, but...” She sips on her drink and lifts her shoulders slowly. “That’s not on my agenda.” Jennifer darts her eyes over to her and my parents who’ve now moved and are sitting on opposite sides of a nearby table. Something tells me that Jennifer is as ambivalent about this union as I am.

I look around the room and see people are dancing to the band. I stand and offer my hand. “Would you care to dance?” Out of my peripheral vision, I see the massive smile from our mothers.

“Thank you.”

I take her hand and lead her out to the dance floor. Pulling her into me, we begin to move across the floor. She’s cold and rigid in my arms. “I’m going to go out on a limb and say you don’t want this.”

She inhales a sharp breath, causing her to gasp. Jennifer lifts her chin to look up at me. “I’m sorry,” she says. “I’ll do better. I understand what my role is in this, and I’ll improve.” She attempts to smile, but she’s so stiff and manages only the facsimile of a smile.

“Can I be honest with you?” She visibly swallows and nods once. “I don’t want this either.”

Instantly she releases a breath and softens in my arms. “Are you kidding?”

“No, I’m not. You’re beautiful, but I’m not at all attracted to you.” Jennifer starts laughing, making me smile. “What?”

“You’re so not my type.” She rolls her eyes shut, then chuckles some more before she straightens. “I know this is what I have to do. I have to be a good wife to an up-and-coming politician. It’s what’s been drummed into me since I was a little girl. I have to be the arm candy, learn how to wine and dine powerful politicians and learn my place. But...” She shakes her head. “I don’t want this.”

“I don’t want to be with someone I don’t love. And, no offense, but I don’t love you nor can I see myself loving you.”

“Thank God,” she says with relief. “Honestly, I feel the same way.” She looks over toward our parents and exhales with frustration. “But, I don’t think it matters how *we* feel, it’s what *they* want.”

Jennifer has a point. Our parents will push us for a long engagement, then to marry as soon as we’re finished college. “I know,” I say in defeat.

“At least you’re not an ogre, I can live with that.” Jennifer’s candid words make me laugh. She arches a brow and smiles. “It’s true.”

“I think it might be worth pretending we have a connection until we can figure a way out of this insanity.”

“Hmm.” She glances toward our parents. “I don’t want the way out to be in the form of divorce. But I really can’t see any other avenue. Can you?”

“No, I can’t. You know what I hate most about this?”

“If you say me, I’m going to lay you out on your ass,” Jennifer says with a hint of humor. I can see her becoming a good friend, but nothing more.

“No, not you.” She releases a relieved breath. “I don’t want to start my political career on a lie. How am I supposed to tell the public to trust me when this is simply a union of breeding for both of us. Me because of the name and the generations, and you because of your family name too. I don’t want to deceive anyone.”

Jennifer scoffs and chuckles at the same time. “This is what I’ve been trained to do ever since I can remember. I was even sent to finishing school. It’s been driven home on how to speak, smile, sit, shake hands, how to exit and enter a room.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. “This has already been decided for us.”

“Do you even want to be in politics?”

“More than you can imagine. But not with someone I don’t love. Do you want to be a politician’s wife?”

“Not at all. Not even one little bit. But I feel like I have to.”

How heartbreaking. “I’m sorry, Jennifer. I can only imagine how difficult and contrived this is for you.”

“Ugh,” she sneers. “I hate the name Jennifer. I prefer Jen, but a senator’s wife can’t be called Jen, it’s too informal and common,” she says with a mocking tone.

I didn’t stop to think about how soul destroying this is for her. “I’m so sorry.”

She lowers her chin as I continue to lead her around the dance floor. The silence between us isn't uncomfortable but there's a tinge of ice to it. "Can you do me a favor?" she asks.

"What is it?"

"Can you not tell anyone please?"

I draw her closer to my body as I glimpse our parents watching us intently. "For now, let's just pretend we're going to go through with this. It'll get both our parents off our backs, and it'll give us time to figure this out. Don't say a word to anyone and I won't say anything either," I offer the only solution I can see working.

She lifts her chin and stares at me with genuine happiness. "If we drag this out for even a month or so, it means my parents won't be actively searching for another up-and-coming politician for me to marry."

"God, that sounds awful."

Jennifer offers me a fake smile. "It's my job."

"It shouldn't be," I say.

"Yeah, I know." She looks over to our parents and intakes a long breath. "Well, should we head over and fake our union? Let's pretend we're happy."

"Sure." I release her from my arms and she instantly links our fingers together. Our mothers relax in their seats when they see Jennifer hold my hand. "Ready?" I murmur.

"As ready as I'll ever be."

We walk over to the table and I pull her chair out. "So, how are you two kids getting on?" Mrs. Marshall asks.

"Great," Jennifer says. "Bennett is a really nice guy."

"We've been thinking," my mom starts. "We'll have you photographed at each other's prom."

Jennifer's leg bounces as a quick, false smile tugs at her lips. "Sounds great," she says.

"Yep, perfect." I reach to hold her clammy hand in mine and give it a reassuring squeeze. I lean over and whisper, "We'll get through this."

Jennifer pulls back and lifts her hand to place it on my chest. "I know," she replies.

This is fucked. Neither Jennifer nor I want this. But for now, we just have to play our parts until we can figure out a way to end this craziness.

BENNETT

“Jennifer Marshall, huh?” Liam picks his burger up and bites into it. “What about Kathryn?”

“We’re not going to go through with it,” I say as I pick up a fry, stare at it for a moment, then toss it aside. “Jen’s a nice girl.”

“Well, who knows? Maybe she’ll turn out to be the love of your life. Besides, I know how hardcore your parents are. There’s no way they haven’t already mapped out your future. And I’ll bet you anything, Jennifer Marshall’s parents have done the same thing. Wouldn’t it be better to end up with someone like her than anyone else? At least she’s easy on the eyes.”

“No,” I protest. “It’s not better. Jen is really nice, but there’s no attraction there, Liam. Can you imagine if I become president, and I have to live four years under that extreme pressure only to return to the residence to someone I don’t love? And let’s not forget, she’s not interested in me either.”

“Speaking of president, I think I should be your chief of staff if you get there.”

The conversation about Jen has easily evolved into a completely different topic. “Pffft,” I scoff. “You want chief of staff?” Liam nods. “Then you better work at putting me in the White House. I’m not handing it to you.”

Liam puffs out his chest and arrogantly lifts his chin. “Maybe you’ll be *my* chief of staff.”

I pick up a fry and throw it at him. “You should start calling me Mr. President. Just so you’re used to it by the time I get there.”

“I’ll call you something, but it won’t be that.” I look to Liam who appears quite pleased with himself. “Like jerk, or maybe dick, or even maybe *chief of staff*.”

I shake my head and click my tongue to the roof of my mouth. “I see the role of media monitor in your future.” Liam’s mouth contorts as the corner of his lips tug up into a playful sneer.

“Media monitor?” he says as he lifts his brows. “You can go fuck yourself.” He picks up the fry I threw at him and launches it at my head. A laugh ripples through me as I dodge the wayward fry.

All the air leaves my lungs when I catch sight of Kathryn walking across the cafeteria with Justine. My entire body straightens and my eyes are glued to her as she brushes her long, dark hair over her shoulder. Kathryn takes my breath away. She’s so classically perfect. “I have no words,” I murmur.

“Seriously, man, you need to stick your tongue in your mouth before you trip over it.”

I snap my gaze to Liam. “What?”

“You’re drooling and you’re being a bit pathetic.”

“She’s the most beautiful person I’ve ever seen,” I honestly admit.

“Oh my God. You sound like someone’s cast a love spell on you. I’m going to have to punch you to snap you out of it.”

I narrow my eyes at Liam. “I’d like to see you try.”

“Ask her out.”

I rub at the tension between my brows. “You know I can’t. Besides, she made it clear she doesn’t want to date.”

“Maybe you’ll be lucky and she’ll turn up to prom without a date.”

My stomach churns as the hair on the back of my neck prickles. The thought of Kathryn being with someone else is stirring an unfamiliar emotion deep within my chest. I’ll fucking kill anyone who puts their hands on her. “You have to do something for me,” I say to Liam.

Liam shakes his head and wags his finger at me. “I can tell by the look on your face that I’m not going to like this favor you’re going to ask.”

I glance toward Kathryn standing in the cafeteria line, then back to Liam. “Being my chief of staff means you have to do everything in your power for your president.”

“You’re not president yet, so you can calm down with this shit.” He gestures with a circular movement toward me. “But now I’m curious and want to know what this favor is.”

“You have to ask Kathryn to the prom.”

“Why?”

“Because if anyone else does, I’ll fucking kill them.”

“Just ask her,” he encourages.

“Jen’s coming with me, and I have to go to hers.”

“Hang up a second.” Liam lifts both his hands and rakes his fingers through his hair. “You want me to ask Kathryn so no one else can ask her, but you’ll be at the prom—on a date—with Jennifer Marshall? Did I get that right?”

“Essentially. But we’re only going to each other’s prom because we have to. And besides, I trust you with my life, Liam, and I know you wouldn’t move in on Kathryn. I just want to make sure the sharks don’t circle.”

“There’s a problem with your plan.”

“Which is?”

“Kathryn.”

“Kathryn’s not a problem at all.”

“How many times have you spoken to her?”

“Enough,” I say.

“She’s been here now for what, three or four months?” I nod. “And she won’t give you the time of day.”

“I’m wearing her down.”

It’s Liam’s turn to laugh. He looks over his shoulder and watches Kathryn and Justine. “Dude,” he starts. “I’ll ask her, but I doubt she’ll accept.”

Kathryn and Justine have now got their lunches and are walking toward us. I jump to my feet and stand to my full height. “Make it work,” I say to Liam before walking over toward the girls. “Care to join us for lunch?” I ask them as I pointedly turn toward Liam.

Kathryn casts a wary eye over my body and smiles. “I have some private things to discuss with Justine, so, no thank you.”

“You do?” Justine’s brows lift in surprise.

“I do.” Kathryn’s eyes are locked on mine, silently begging me to challenge her.

“One day,” I say as I take a step back. “You’re going to have to say yes.”

She half shrugs and winks at me. *She’s so cheeky.* “Keep holding your breath, Bennett.” My name on her tongue makes my cock twitch and my heart quicken.

I head back to Liam and sit opposite him. “Shot down, again. Aren’t you sick of her rejecting you?”

I look at my beautiful girl and smirk. “I’m going to marry her.”

“You poor bastard,” Liam says and snorts with a condescending laugh. I

turn to focus on him and lift my hands in question. “Your parents are going to have your balls if they ever find out how in love you are with someone who’s not their pick.”

“My balls will remain intact and I *will* marry Kathryn. I don’t care what my parents have to say.”

“Please let me be there for that conversation. It’ll make for a good eulogy.”

I intake a deep breath as I turn to look at my girl once more.

Kathryn really is...*perfect*.

BENNETT

The limousine pulls up to the Marshall's home, and I take a moment to compose myself. I'm not nervous, more like uncomfortable at the deception Jen and I have to pull off. I get out of the car and walk to their front door. I knock once, and the door opens almost immediately.

"Bennett, how are you, son?" Mr. Marshall asks when he opens the door, hand out to shake mine.

"Very well, thank you, sir," I reply as I step into the foyer.

"Jennifer isn't ready yet. She'll be down in a few moments. Join me in my office."

"Of course," I say as I follow him across the foyer and down a long hallway to the left.

He steps into a room and heads to sit behind his desk. "Close the door." *Ugh, here we go.* Once I close the door, Mr. Marshall indicates for me to sit opposite the desk. "Would you care for a drink? Scotch?"

"I'm eighteen, sir," I say as I stare at him. Though I already know this is a test to see if I'm worthy. And, if I was interested in Jen, and she was interested in me, then I'd understand. But, neither of us wants this.

"Hah! Yes, that's right." He stands to pour himself a drink and holds up the glass silently asking me *again*. I shake my head and sit straighter on the chair. "I wanted to talk to you about tonight."

Oh no. "I'll have Jennifer home when the prom is over."

He softens as he swigs the entire contents down. "Well, if you have a hotel room booked..." God no, not with Jen. "I expect you to use protection."

"I'm sorry, sir, but there's been a misunderstanding."

"I'm not a prude, Bennett. I understand that prom means she'll be losing

her virginity, and if that's going to happen then I want to make sure it's with her future husband. However, I don't want her pregnant until you're married." This conversation is wrong on so many levels. "She *cannot* have a child out of wedlock, and you *cannot* afford that either. A senator who has an illegitimate child won't be accepted by the American public."

"Sir, with all due respect, I don't think the American public cares about that. I think they're more worried about how to pay their bills than whether I have a child before I'm married."

Mr. Marshall's jaw tightens. "Politics is all about perception, son. And the quicker you learn this, the better politician you'll become." Something I've heard my entire life.

"All I'm saying is I have no intention of being dishonorable with Jennifer." Besides, I'm not interested in her.

Mr. Marshall gives me a confirming nod before he looks over my shoulder toward the closed door. "I do believe my princess is ready."

He'd know this how? The door is closed, and I didn't hear anything. He just wanted to warn me to make sure I wrap my dick so I wouldn't bring embarrassment to his family. "I'll have her home once the prom has concluded, sir," I reiterate before we leave the office.

Mr. Marshall leads me to the foyer where we wait at the bottom of the staircase for only a handful of seconds before Mrs. Marshall hurries down the steps with a massive smile on her face and her phone ready to take photos. "Bennett, you look handsome."

"Thank you, ma'am," I say as I pull my shoulders back.

From the top of the stairs, Jen appears wearing a black gown that poofs out at the hips. She's definitely pretty, but she's no Kathryn. "Wow," I say when she makes it to the last step. I advance toward her and offer my arm. "You look beautiful."

She looks me up and down and nods. "You scrub up okay, too," she playfully says.

"Jennifer," Mrs. Marshall scolds.

"Sorry, Mom." Jen drops her gaze to the floor. She pulls herself together and turns to me. "You look very handsome, Bennett."

A sadness passes over her, and I can't help but feel sorry for Jen. "Shall we?" I gesture toward the door.

"I need photos," her mom says. "I'm sure your mother will want me to send her some."

Ugh. “Mom would love that, thank you.”

It takes about half an hour and a million different poses before Mrs. Marshall is satisfied with the pictures she’s taken.

“We should be going,” Jen says.

Her mom gives her a hug and whispers something to cause Jen’s cheeks to flush.

“I’m trusting you to take care of my princess,” Mr. Marshall warns.

“With my life, sir.” He holds his hand out for me to shake.

“Let’s go,” Jen says once I’ve taken her father’s hand. She links her fingers through mine as we head toward the waiting limousine. “Ugh,” she grumbles.

I wait for Jen to slide in before I do, then close the door. “Are you okay?”

Jen closes her eyes and leans her head against the window. “I understand that it’s all about appearances, but sometimes it’s suffocating.” She tugs at her dress as she turns away from me. “I’m surprised they didn’t inform the local paper to have one of their photographers at the house.”

I’m stuck at what I should do. I extend my hand and place it over hers. “I’m sorry,” I say.

Her shoulders tighten and she shifts in the seat to look at me. “It’s not your fault, Bennett. Truthfully, I’m glad it’s you and not some asshole who thinks they can do whatever they want with me because I’ve been promised to him.”

“Why don’t you tell your parents how you feel? They might surprise you.”

Jen scoffs and shakes her head. “How about you? Why don’t you do the same?”

“It’s different for me.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to be in politics, you don’t.”

Jen’s brows rise. “Then it looks like we’re stuck with one another. But, like I said, at least you’re a decent guy.” She scans me over as the corner of her mouth lifts. “So far.”

“Hey,” I say and playfully shove her shoulder. “I’m a great fucking guy.”

The car pulls up to where her prom is and we both groan in unison. “Ha, I spoke too soon,” Jen scoffs. “Of course, they would’ve arranged a photographer from the local paper. And just to add to this joyous occasion, Roy Cameron is here too.”

“Great,” I say with dullness. “A local political reporter and a cameraman.”

I stay in the car until she’s ready. Jen gulps and takes a deep breath. “Well, let’s get this over with.” Jen pinches her cheeks and runs her hand through her hair. What the fuck is she doing? “Trust me, if my cheeks aren’t rosy, I won’t hear the end of it from my mother,” she answers my unasked question.

“Rosy cheeks?”

“Better believe it.”

I shake my head trying to dislodge that incredibly archaic image. *How ridiculous*. Once I’m out, I extend my hand for Jen’s. She slides out so effortlessly, and when she emerges, she has the perfect smile plastered on her face. Jen looks to me like I’m her beaming sun and she sidles into my side.

“Mr. Adams and Miss Marshall, you look so beautiful together,” Roy pointedly says to Jen.

“Thank you,” Jen replies with ease.

He tries to ask me questions about my father, but I wave my hand to him. “Tonight is Jennifer’s prom so this is all about her.”

“Spoken like a true politician,” Roy says. “Mr. Adams, the word is you’re interested in following in your father’s footsteps.”

Jen tightens her hand around my arm as if she’s silently urging me to answer.

I stop in front the doors to her prom and smile. “You’ve heard right. I’m already quite active with the party, and I pay attention.”

“How are you—”

“Thank you,” Jen says, cutting him off.

“Enjoy the rest of your evening,” I say and lead Jen inside.

“Get used to it, Bennett.” The hall is buzzing with music and an abundance of students all impeccably dressed. Jen holds my arm tighter, and it’s clear to see she’s not comfortable here nor is she interested. “Shall we find our seats?”

“Of course.”

Once we’re at our table, a few of her friends stop by, some of whom eye me up and down. “Hey, Jen,” a red-haired girl says.

Jen sits straighter and smiles brightly. “Hi, Charli,” Jen replies. “Wow, I love your dress.” Jen’s voice has a slight crack.

“Thank you. I saw you walk in and thought whoa, you look amazing.”

Charli looks to me, then back to Jen. But Jen is caught up in staring at Charli.

“Bennett Adams,” I say as I stand and offer her a handshake.

“Bennett Adams?” Charli’s brows furrow as she stares at me. Hesitantly, she reaches across and places her hand in mine. “Are you Senator Adams’s son?”

“I am,” I reply.

“Oh.” She arches a brow and stares at me in disgust before shifting her gaze to Jen. “Him?” she asks without fear of offending me.

“It’s complicated,” Jen replies as she gazes toward Charli.

“Drinks?” I ask both girls.

“Yes, please,” Jen replies without looking at me.

“Not for me.” Charli moves forward in her chair and begins to speak with Jen in a low voice.

I walk away from them and now understand why Jen is so opposed to this. I take my time getting drinks, leaving the girls to talk and sort out whatever is going on between them. However, I do keep an eye on them, because judging by Charli’s body language and Jen’s slumped shoulders neither look happy about *our* arrangement. Charli stands and gently places her hand on Jen’s shoulder causing Jen to lean into her touch.

Shit.

I take my cue to return when Charli leaves and Jen can’t tear her eyes off of her. I return with the drinks and place Jen’s on the table. Her eyes are glassy, but she straightens and offers me a small smile. “Thank you.”

“Your parents don’t know, do they?”

Jen reaches for her drink, brings it to her lips and takes a sip. “About what?” she asks as if I have no idea about her and Charli.

“You’re in a relationship with Charli.”

Jen turns quickly. “No, I’m not,” she says with determination, though the sadness in her eyes tells another story.

“You don’t have to pretend with me, Jen. I could see it. You two are together.”

She lurches forward to take my hands in hers. “Please, don’t say anything.” Jen gulps and she purses her lips together. “Please, you can’t...”

“You should be with her.”

“Huh,” she scoffs and releases my hands. “Sure, because that’ll happen.”

“Do your parents know?” Jen drops her chin and wrings her hands together in her lap. “Jen?”

“They do know. And they said it’s a phase I’ll grow out of. They said that I’m too young to know if I’m really gay and that all I need is a good husband and he’ll *straighten me out*.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose as I close my eyes and think about this intense, horrid situation we find ourselves in. “Jen—”

“No, don’t say anything. I don’t want your pity.”

I lower my hand and open my eyes to stare at her. “You don’t want my pity? Well, too bad, you’re getting it. I feel like an asshole.”

“Like I said, at least you’re kind to me. If you dump me, they’ll set me up with someone else, and who knows how they’ll treat me.”

I scoot my seat closer to hers and wrap Jen in my arms. I kiss the side of her head while holding her. “We’ll figure this out.”

“There’s nothing to figure out, Bennett. I marry you and become an incubator so we can show the country what a perfect politician you are with a stable home, or I’ll have to do that for someone else.”

“This isn’t right, Jen. But, let’s not make any decisions that’ll be hard to back out of for now. We’ll figure it out. I just don’t know how yet.”

I can feel someone staring at us, and when I look across the room, I see Charli’s eyes glued on us. She looks heartbroken, but also angry.

This is truly the worst possible scenario.

I can’t live with myself knowing Jen is miserable.

“We’ll figure it out,” I repeat and tighten my arms around her quivering shoulders.

But for now, we have to go along with this ridiculous charade.

BENNETT

Here we go again. I'm on my way to pick Jen up. I've been caught in my own personal turmoil this past week. Stuck between what I should do because it's right, but also what we *have to do*.

The limousine pulls up at the Marshall's, and I quickly make my way up to the door where Mr. Marshall is already waiting for me. "Bennett," he says and extends his hand.

"Sir," I say.

"Jennifer won't be long."

"I'm here," she calls from the top of the stairs.

"There's my princess." He smiles at her before turning to me and saying, "The same rules apply from last week."

"Absolutely." I give him a reassuring nod, then divert my attention to Jen. "Wow," I say as she makes her way down the staircase. "You're beautiful." I step forward and offer her my elbow when she reaches the second to last step.

"Thank you." She takes my arm and we start heading out toward the limousine.

"Wait, I need photos," Mrs. Marshall calls.

Jen glances at me as a shared exasperation passes between us. "Of course," Jen says as she looks over her shoulder at her mother. "Out in the garden?"

"Perfect." Her mom hurries ahead of us and begins to take photos.

Jen and I look like we're made for each other, but neither of us are feeling any kind of intimate connection. Jen because she's gay, and me because all I want is Kathryn. When the photos are done, Mrs. Marshall whispers something in Jen's ear, then steps back for Mr. Marshall to wrap his arm

around his wife's shoulders.

I wait until Jen is in the car, then slide in beside her. "The all-American perfect family," Jen says flatly. "But there's nothing perfect about it."

"I've been thinking about our situation and I think I've come up with something."

The car lunges forward and heads toward my prom. Jen looks at me, then to the driver, and puts the divider up so the driver can't hear. "What? Let me eat cyanide so all this will be over?"

My brows lift and my lips part. "Well, that was a lot darker than what I was thinking."

"I was joking," she says with no humor.

"Aha." I stare at Jen for a moment. "My proposal is this. Why don't we get engaged, tell them we want an extended engagement, then at some stage I can cheat on you, which'll devastate you. But, because I've broken your heart, your parents will lay off forcing you to marry someone else for a while. Maybe even for good."

Jen scrunches her nose as her eyes are fixed on mine. "Wh-what?"

"Don't make me say it again. Basically—"

She waves her hand at me to stop. "I get what you're saying, but this will make you the villain, and that's not fair."

"What's not fair is you marrying me when you're gay. Besides, I need to get used to being called all kinds of names, especially if I'm going to make it as a politician."

"You're willing to create a rift with my father, just so I can be happy?" I lift a shoulder. "My father could end your career before it even starts."

"Let him try."

"I can't ask you to sacrifice this, Bennett. Besides, imagine when you're forty or fifty and it comes out that you cheated on your first fiancée."

"I'll handle it."

"Yeah, but what if I have a wife and reporters start sniffing around wanting an exclusive about the time that Senator Bennett Adams broke my heart because he cheated. You can imagine what the headlines will say." She relaxes in the seat, and lifts her hand to cut through the air. "Senator Adams turned her gay."

"It doesn't matter what the headlines say. As long as you're happy, I don't give a rat's ass what's said about me."

Jen lifts her hands to conceal her face. "My parents will disown me."

“They’ll come around.”

She lowers her hands and sighs. “What if they don’t?”

I throw my arms up in surrender. “Just think about it. We can say we’re young and taking it slow. Maybe get through the first year of college, then break up.”

“I don’t know, Bennett. I just...” Jen lowers her chin and closes her eyes.

“Let’s enjoy ourselves tonight, and we can think it over some more before we make a decision.”

Jen places her hand on my thigh and squeezes. “You’re a good guy. Thank you.” A tiny smile tugs at her lips, but she still looks so damn sad.

— * —

“You must be Jennifer Marshall. I’m Liam Price.” Liam pulls the seat out beside Jen and plonks down.

“The pleasure is mine,” Jen replies graciously.

“Liam’s my best friend,” I say. I lean in closer to whisper, “You can trust him.”

She turns to look at me, her eyes wide as fear flushes over her face. “Did you tell him?”

“Not everything, I didn’t. But I know there’s no way he’d betray my trust if I did.”

Jen stares at me for a moment before her features soften. “I trust you, so if you say *you* trust him, then so do I.”

“What are you two whispering about?”

“Well, we...” I glance behind Liam and I see Kathryn float into the overly decorated hall. “Damn.” All the air leaves my chest as I continue to stare at Kathryn. I push my chair back and head straight toward her. “You’re perfect,” I say when I reach her.

A small smile tugs at her lips as she stares into my eyes. “Thank you.”

“I’m...” I shake my head, unable to form a complete sentence. “Speechless.” The dress she’s wearing hugs all of her curves but what’s driving me crazy is the nape of her neck. I don’t even know what it is, but with her hair pulled up exposing her bare alabaster skin, it’s sending me into

a tailspin.

“Are you going to say anything else, or are you going to stand there gawking at me?”

“Gawking, definitely gawking.”

Kathryn’s laugh sends shock waves to my cock. My chest tightens, and all I want to do is spend the entire night with the most amazing person I’ve ever met. She lifts her hand and places it to my chest, playfully pushing me back. “Anyone would think you have the hots for me, Mr. Adams.”

“I’ll scream it from the rooftops if it means you’ll spend one dance in my arms.”

Kathryn glances around as a perfect shade of red touches her cheeks. “You’re smooth, but...” She indicates toward the table where Liam and Jen are. “What would your date think?”

“Trust me, she’d understand.”

Kathryn moves to lean in to me. Her mouth is a hairsbreadth from my ear, and I close my eyes as she softly says, “I won’t be the other woman, Bennett. Ever.”

I reach out to grab her arm, but her warmth disappears forcing me to open my eyes. “You’ve never been my second choice; you’ve always been my first.”

Kathryn smiles as she glances toward Jen again. “If you say so.” Jacob approaches us and stands to the side. “Jacob,” Kathryn says and gives him a smile she should be reserving for me.

“Would you like to dance, Kathryn?”

My skin prickles as I grind my teeth. “I’d love to, thank you,” she says and takes his extended hand.

I’m seething at the fact another man has his hands on my woman. My jaw is protesting painfully as I keep my eyes on them. “You need to calm down before you pop a damn vein,” Jen says as she sidles up beside me.

“I’m fine,” I snap. Jen’s small whimper makes me feel like a complete dick for biting at her. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that.”

“Come here.” She leads me back to the table where Liam is attempting to keep his mouth shut. “I take it that you two are together?”

“No, we’re not,” I start. “Why didn’t you get Kathryn to come to the prom with you?” I smack Liam on the arm, still irritated.

“I can’t force her to do something she doesn’t want to, Bennett.”

“Now Jacob has his filthy fucking hands all over her.”

“Calm down,” Jen says as she places her hand on my strained forearm. “I can talk to her.”

“That’ll work,” Liam says.

I keep my hard stare on Jacob and watch as he dances with my girl. His hands are getting dangerously close to her ass, and I swear I’ll rip them off his body and shove them down his throat if he touches her butt. “Bennett,” Jen says, dragging my eyes away from that fucker.

The problem with Jen speaking to Kathryn is that it exposes Jen. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“Why can’t you?” Liam asks.

“Butt out of it, Liam,” I say, not wanting to share Jen’s secret with him until she’s prepared to do so.

Jen swivels in her chair toward Liam. “I don’t know you, but Bennett says you can be trusted, so I’m going to tell you something and if you betray my trust, then you’ve betrayed Bennett.”

“Jen,” I say trying to stop her.

“I’m gay, and I don’t want to be tied to Bennett any more than he wants to be tied to me.”

Liam’s eyes widen as he reclines back in the chair. “I didn’t see *that* coming.”

Jen sighs and shakes her head. “Don’t tell me, you think being gay is wrong?”

“Hell no,” Liam says. “I’m all for it. Lesbian porn is my favorite. Two, even three women. I’m down for that.” He waggles his brows and smirks.

Jen rolls her eyes and huffs. “Typical boy. Sexualizing an identity. *Great.*” Liam’s smirk instantly falls. *Whoop*, she just handed him his ass. She shakes her head and turns toward me. “Let me speak with her and she’ll understand.”

“Sorry,” Liam grumbles as he lowers his head in shame.

“I can’t allow you to out yourself.”

Jen screws up her mouth, then nibbles on her lower lip as she stares at a glass on the table.

“Well, this is fun,” Liam says as he lifts his brows and takes a deep breath.

Jen shakes her head and turns toward me. “It’s not right that you can’t be with the girl you like, nor can I. I’m done.” She stands abruptly and heads toward the dance floor.

“What’s she doing?” Liam asks as we both jump to our feet.

“She’s sacrificing herself.” I run after her and grab Jen’s arm before she gets to Kathryn. “You’re small but damned fast.” I pull her back toward the table. “You can’t do this.”

She shrugs out of my hold and stands firm in front of both Liam and me. “Did he tell you what he’s proposed?” she asks Liam who shakes his head and slowly lifts his shoulders. “Because I’m gay, he said we’ll have a long engagement, and he’ll ‘cheat’ on me so I can break it off with him and be ‘heartbroken’ enough that my parents won’t try to force me into marrying someone else.” She air quotes the key words.

“You did?” Liam looks to me.

“It’s a no-brainer, it’s the right thing to do.”

“This…” Jen makes a circular movement between the three of us. “You’re willing to be the scapegoat for me, and I’m prepared to do the same thing for you.”

“This is different,” I say as we head back toward the table.

“Why?” Liam argues. “If anything, it’s exactly the same thing you’ve offered Jennifer.”

“Jen,” she corrects as she folds her arms in front of her chest. I can’t help but smile when she invites Liam to call her by a name her parents won’t allow. To me, it means she’s trusting him. “And Liam’s right. Why can you do something so amazing, but I can’t?” Jen wets her lips and exhales a deep sigh. “Let me talk to her, she might not even believe me.”

“Man, for a fake girlfriend, you’re really cool about all of this,” Liam says with a broad smile.

“Bennett’s a good guy, and he deserves to be with someone who’s interested in him.”

“That’s another thing,” I say. “She might not be.”

“Ah, seriously?” Jen’s pitch elevates. “Make no mistake. She’s into you.”

“She is?” Liam asks. “Are you sure?”

Yeah, are you sure? “I don’t know.” I peer over to where Jacob and Kathryn are now sitting. His arm is draped on the back of her chair, and his fingertips are lightly skimming her shoulder. I swallow back my anger as my eyes bore into where he’s touching her. That fucker better not get any ideas.

“Really?” Jen asks. “I bet you’re more busy staring at the guy than her.”

“What?” I avert my attention from *him* to Kathryn, only to find her eyes locked on me.

“You two are such boys. All testosterone and no brains.” Jen stands and looks toward me. “I’m going to the bathroom.” She makes her way over to where the bathrooms are, and I notice Kathryn stand and head in the same direction.

“Shit,” I say as I stand and rush toward them.

“What?” Liam’s right by my side.

“Kathryn and Jen are both in the bathroom together.”

I extend my hand to push on the door, but Liam pulls me back. “You can’t go in there, Bennett.”

He’s right, I can’t. Liam pulls the closest chair to the bathroom out from the table, and sits. I pace back and forth, worried that something is going to happen. I hope Jen doesn’t say anything. It’s not fair to her to let her out herself because *I* like Kathryn. “How long have they been in there for?” It feels like hours.

“About five minutes.”

The door creaks open, and I spin and wait. But it’s neither of the girls, which makes me even more anxious. I slide my phone out of my pocket to check in case Jen’s sent me a message. “What’s taking them so long?”

“They’re talking about you,” Liam replies flatly.

My chest tightens and I keep pacing as I wait for the girls. The door creaks open again, and this time, they walk out together. “Sorted,” Jen says, turns to Liam, grabs his hand, and drags him to his feet. “Dance with me.”

“What?” I ask as they both head toward the dance floor. “I’m sorry,” I say to Kathryn.

She steps forward, lifts her chin, and places a kiss on my lips. In this one moment of crazy, everything is sane and right. My right hand relaxes on her hip while my left snakes around to her lower back. Our kiss is calm, yet passionate. “Kathryn,” I whisper against her soft lips.

“Shut up and kiss me.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I move her closer to me while our mouths connect. My heart thrums with happiness as I hold her against my body.

Kathryn finally pulls back and looks up at me. “I understand now.”

“What did Jen tell you?”

“The truth.”

I link our fingers and lead her to our table. I pull her seat out and wait until Kathryn is seated before I take my place beside her. “I don’t want to do anything that’ll hurt Jen.”

“I know.” She smiles. “Which is why you have to continue with this arrangement you have with her.”

“How much did Jen tell you?”

“She’s gay, and doesn’t want to be a senator’s wife because well...she’s gay. But you’re sacrificing your potential reputation so she’s not outed to her parents. As far as I’m concerned, that’s probably one of the most selfless things anyone can do.”

“But you understand that as much as I want you, I can’t have you.”

“Not publicly, and not for now.” My eyes focus on her mouth as her pink tongue peeks out and sweeps across her lower lip. “If Jen has anything to do with this, then you two won’t be together for long.” She’s so beautiful.

“She has to protect herself, and I can’t let her do anything that’ll jeopardize that.”

Kathryn tilts her head to the side while a slow smile tugs at her lips. “Now I see it.”

“See what?”

“People have said you’re set to take over from your father. They’ve said you want to be a senator, but...” Her head shakes. “I don’t think being senator for you is right.”

“You don’t think I can be a good politician?”

“I think you can be an amazing politician.”

“Then what?” I look over to the dance floor where Liam and Jen are dancing and talking. She says something funny that makes Liam throw his head back and laugh. Jen has slotted into our friendship easily.

“You can be so much more.”

Kathryn’s words make me turn toward her. “Who knows where I’ll end up.”

She lifts her chin and cocks a brow. “It’s a shame that in a few short weeks we’re going to be on opposite sides of the country.”

Is this some kind of invitation? “Why is it a shame, Kathryn?”

“Because if you were going to Stanford we might’ve been...” she stops and intakes a breath. “But, you’re going to Yale, right?”

It’s no secret where we’re all going. “I am.”

Her shoulders soften and she intakes a long breath, only to let it out as a sigh. “Pity.”

My brain shifts into overdrive. Stanford has one of the best political science degrees there is on offer. The only reason I chose Yale is because

generations of my family have graduated from there. It's too late now, but I can always see if I can transfer. A transfer is difficult, but not completely impossible. "I have an idea, but I can only do it if you and Jen are on board."

"What is it?"

My skin erupts in goose bumps as I think about the logistics and *if* this can work. I stand to my feet and when Liam looks over, I motion for him and Jen to return to the table.

"I've got an idea," I say as Jen sits.

"Give me a minute, I'll grab some drinks." Liam disappears and the girls talk between themselves as my head spins with the details.

Once Liam returns with four drinks, he places them in front of us. "What's this idea of yours?"

"You're going to Stanford, right?" I look to Kathryn who nods. "And you want to go to UCLA, right?"

"Yeah," Jen says slowly.

"But, you've been programmed to be near your future husband." I point to myself. "Me."

"Don't remind me, but yes."

I look to Liam and smile. His eyes narrow and his forehead crinkles. It takes him a few seconds before he realizes what I'm about to suggest. "Your father is going to hit the roof," Liam says.

"Can someone fill me in on what's happening?" Kathryn asks as she turns to Jen who lifts her shoulders.

"Don't look at me, I have no idea what they've silently agreed to." Jen points to me, then Liam.

"You and I are going to go to your parents and tell them that I'm going to transfer to Stanford, which means you should go to UCLA."

"But what if you're not accepted?" Kathryn says.

"Of course I'll be accepted," I say with confidence. "Because there's no other way. I want to be with you." I look to Kathryn. "But, for now we have to be together." I point between Jen and me. "We can make this work. But it's something we all need to be in agreement about."

"That means I need to transfer too," Liam says.

I turn to him and crinkle my forehead. "Not if you don't want to."

Liam tilts his head back and looks among us all. He chews on the inside of his cheek as his eyes narrow. "Are you seriously willing to put Jen before your own needs?" He looks to Jen and says, "No offence."

“None taken.”

The three of them all look to me, waiting for my reply. “I’m willing to do what’s right.”

“To protect me?” Jen asks.

I lean forward and take Kathryn’s hands in mine. It takes me a moment to formulate what I need to say. “This is too much to ask of anyone, but I can’t throw Jen under the bus, and I want to do what’s right.”

Kathryn shakes her head and releases a humorless chuckle. This all became real, real fast. “What if you and I don’t work out?”

“That’s not going to happen.”

“Pffft,” Liam groans as he sits back and places his hands on his head while staring at me. “If Bennett says that’s not gonna happen, then you can believe him.”

“I know we haven’t even gone on a date, but I promise you this, Kathryn. If you give me a chance, you won’t regret it.” I squeeze her hands in mine.

“He hasn’t even hit on me,” Jen says in my defense.

“That might have something to do with the fact you’re gay?” Liam adds.

“Nope. Even before he knew, he didn’t try anything at all.” Jen smiles proudly. “I believe you, Bennett. I think you’d move heaven and hell to do anything for Kathryn.”

This all hangs in the balance, on whether Kathryn agrees to what seems an incredibly ridiculous plan. “This is mad,” Kathryn says.

“Yeah, it is,” I agree. “But, if you’re willing to take the leap, so am I.” I move my seat so our bodies are touching. “You have nothing to lose by saying yes.”

“Actually, Bennett’s right,” Liam adds. “Bennett and I will uproot our lives to move to the other side of the country. You’re already going.” A silent agreement passes between Liam and me.

“And you’re prepared to move with Bennett?” Kathryn asks Liam.

He pulls his shoulders back and lifts his chin. “I’m his chief of staff—which means where he goes, I go.”

“That’s confidence if ever I’ve heard it,” Kathryn says. There’s a small smile on Kathryn’s perfect face. She slowly lifts her shoulders and shakes her head. “This is insane, but…” she pauses as she looks between us. “I guess, the only ones who are at risk of getting hurt are you and Liam.” She points to me, then to Liam. “If you’re willing to take the risk, so am I.”

I wrap Kathryn in my arms and savor the moment. She’s so right in my

arms, and I hate to say it, but she feels like she belongs with me.
She's mine for now and forever.

BENNETT

“What are you doing today?” Dad asks as we sit at the table, having breakfast.

“Jennifer and I are hanging out with Liam and Kathryn.”

Mom’s brow arches as she lifts her coffee cup to her lips. “Are Liam and Kathryn serious?” I don’t have the opportunity to answer because Dad cuts in.

“You can come to the office with me today,” Dad says. “A senator never takes a day off. He’s there for his people, every single day. Besides, midterms are coming up and we need all hands on deck. Actually, it would be good for Jennifer to accompany you. Start showing yourselves as a couple.”

“That’s a great idea.” A piece of my heart breaks because I know there’s no way of getting out of this. Pushing up out of my chair, I head upstairs to call Jen. She answers on the first ring. “Hey,” I say as I sink on the bed.

“You excited about today?”

“Dad’s making me go into the office with him. He says with midterms coming up, I should be there.”

“Oh,” Jen groans, obviously as upset as I am.

“It gets worse.”

“Oh no.”

“He wants you there too so we can begin our lives in the public eye.” I close my eyes and lean my elbow on my knee as I massage the tension forming across my forehead.

“Here we go,” she says. “What time will you pick me up?”

I shrug, disappointed that I won’t be spending time with Kathryn. “Say an hour?”

“Alright, I’ll be ready.” Jen sighs, then says, “Bye.”

“See ya.” I hang up and stay seated for a moment before calling Kathryn.

“Hey, you,” she says. Hearing her voice forces a smile to my face.

“I have some bad news.” Kathryn groans. “Jen and I have to go into the office with Dad to help out.”

“What? But we’re supposed to spend today together.”

“I know, I’m sorry.” Kathryn’s silence breaks my heart. This was going to be our first non-date date. It was going to be with Liam and Jen too, but at least we could’ve used them as cover in case anyone paid attention.

“What if Liam and I come down to help too? I guess, spending time together at the office is better than not at all.”

“I can’t drag you into this.”

“I’m offering.”

I perk up at the thought this might work. “Let me call Liam and I’ll call you back.”

“Bennett?”

“What is it?”

“I really want us to be together today. If we have to sneak around, then so be it.”

A massive smile tugs at my lips. “Let me see what I can do.” Fuck, I’m a damn goner when it comes to Kathryn. I hang up and call Liam. “Change of plans,” I say when he answers.

“What’s going on?”

I explain today’s situation and that Kathryn is on board with it. We spend a few moments hashing out the details, and then I call Kathryn to let her know what we’re doing.

With a spring in my step, I take a quick shower and dress in one of the suits Dad has deemed appropriate for the office. “I’m going to pick up Jennifer,” I call to Mom who’s in her library reading.

“Okay. Have fun, darling.”

I sure as hell will, now that I know Kathryn will be there.

I keep eagerly looking toward the door, anticipating Kathryn. “Are you waiting for someone, son?” Dad asks.

“Liam said he’ll be coming to help too.”

“Liam’s coming?” Dad smiles proudly. “He’ll make a good addition to your team once you get to this position.” Dad pulls his shoulders back with triumph and pride. He looks over to Jen, who’s had filing dumped on her. “She’ll make a good senator’s wife too.”

“Uh-huh,” I agree. *As long as that senator is female.* The front door opens, and I look toward it to see Kathryn walking in with Liam by her side. My mouth dries and my heartbeat quickens as I watch her enter the office like she’s stepping on air. Everything about Kathryn is perfection, from her dark-brown hair, to her rich chocolate eyes. She exudes strong sex appeal.

“Who’s that?” Dad asks, interrupting me from staring at the most beautiful woman in the world.

“That’s Kathryn.”

“Liam, it’s good to see you again.” Dad confidently heads toward Liam and holds his hand out.

“Sir,” Liam says as he shakes his hand.

“Hey.” I give Liam a jerk of the chin. “Kathryn,” I say as I step forward and place a kiss on her cheek. My heart hammers as I linger for a few seconds too long. Kathryn’s breath hitches as she discreetly skims her fingertips across the back of my hand. I have to break this connection, or I’m going to do something stupid. Like *really* kiss her with heat and passion. Or take Kathryn in my arms and refuse to let her go. I take a hesitant step back, and turn to my father. My resolve is rapidly declining, and I’m on the verge of telling Dad that Jen and I will never be. But Kathryn...she’s my forever.

“I’d like to introduce you to Kathryn, my girlfriend,” Liam jumps in when he sees my hesitation. His eyes slightly widen, silently screaming at me not to ruin the arrangement we’ve all agreed upon.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Kathryn,” Dad says as he extends his hand to her.

“Thank you,” she timidly replies and tucks loose strands of her hair behind her ear.

“Where do you want us, sir?” Liam asks as he places his hand to the small of Kathryn’s back.

I have to shove my hands in my pockets so no one sees me balling them into fists. I take a step backward and shake my head to dislodge the

murderous thoughts I'm carrying for my best friend. I know he'd never betray me, but the fact he's touching her when I can't angers me. "I should get back to doing what I was doing," I say before turning to leave.

I see Dad giving Liam and Kathryn direction. Liam heads over and sits on the chair next to me. "You've gotta cool it, man."

"I know. I'm sorry. I just saw you touch her and I nearly lost my shit." I pinch the bridge of my nose, frustrated with myself. "I know you wouldn't ever betray me."

"You're right, I wouldn't. I know she's your girl, but we all have to pretend if it means we keep Jen from being outed."

"I know," I grumble with further irritation. "I lost myself for a moment, and I just saw red."

"Fuck, Bennett," Liam sighs. I lift my gaze to look at him and slowly raise my shoulders. "I've never seen you like this over a chick before. You've got it bad."

"Shut up," I murmur. Although, the truth of it is that I do in fact have it really bad for Kathryn.

A warm hand touches my back, a gentle aroma of lavender drifts past me, and I instantly know that it's not Kathryn. "Jennifer." I smile as I turn to look at her. My Dad is watching us intently from his office.

Jen's face breaks into a large smile. She leans down and places a small kiss on my cheek before whispering, "Your dad is watching."

I clasp her hand in mine and squeeze. "I know." I lift her hand and kiss her knuckles.

"This is so gross," she says while maintaining her fake smile.

"Thanks," I reply with genuine humor.

"Not you, just the fact we have to pretend." She pulls her hand back from mine and pats my shoulder. "Thank you though, you really don't have to, but you are. For me." She smiles and lifts her head to look around. "I better get back to filing. Yay," she says with obvious distaste. "Filing, just what a senator's wife should be doing." Jen walks away, leaving Liam and me alone at the table with reports spread out in front of us. I glance over at Kathryn and when the corner of her lips turn up into a small smile, my breath catches in my throat. *I'm such a goner.*

"Stop it," Liam says. I tear my eyes away from Kathryn to glance at Liam, lifting my hands in question. "If you keep looking at her like that, your dad will notice."

I sit back in the seat and glance toward Dad who, sure enough, is still watching. I lower my head and focus on the work. “He was,” I say to Liam.

“You’ve gotta cool it, man.”

He’s right, I do. However, my heart has replaced my brain and I can’t stop looking at my girl, waiting for the moment I can touch her. “I know.”

“Today may not have worked out like you wanted it to, but at least we’re going to the movies tomorrow.”

I hate this. I just want to touch Kathryn, and I fucking can’t. *Yet.*

BENNETT

Jen's hands wring together as I drive. "What's wrong?" I ask.

"My parents." Jen exhales loudly and slumps further in the passenger seat. "They're pressuring me to force you for a ring."

"Ugh," I grumble. "We're eighteen, and nowhere near ready for this."

Jen snaps her head to stare at me. "We're not getting married, Bennett."

"I know that, but even for a pretend engagement it's too fast."

Jen gently places her hand on my thigh and squeezes. "This is a lot of pressure for you. You have to deceive your parents, while you probably feel obligated to protect me." She intakes a sharp breath. "Maybe it's for the best if I tell them that I can't marry you. I'm gay, God damn it."

For a spilt second, I entertain the notion of Jen doing exactly that. But I know how ruthless and relentless her parents *and* my parents are. "No, it's best not to do that."

"You're miserable, Bennett. Anyone can see it, and this is the perfect opportunity to tell them."

I glance toward her and lift my brows. "No, we need to stick to the plan or you'll be forced to marry someone else, and who knows how that'll turn out. If we eventually have freedom, then it's a small sacrifice we have to make now."

Jen turns in her seat to look out the window. Her silence screams volumes. She knows I'm right, and I hate this for us both.

I pull into an available space near the movie theater, exit the car, and begin to round the hood where Jen meets me at the front of the car. "I would've opened your door."

"I can do it." She looks around before extending her hand to me. "If we

have to do this, then we need to make it realistic.”

I link our fingers together, and it feels wrong to me. “God forbid one of our parents’ friends see us out and we’re not acting like the happy couple.” I feel nothing but sadness for Jen more than for me. At least at the end of this, I’ll have Kathryn, but poor Jen will need to face her parents and force them to understand that she’s gay. “The best thing we can do is move to LA.”

“I’m counting down the days to your acceptance into Stanford so we can move. At least we won’t have eyes on us all the time.” Jen takes in a sharp breath. “Let’s make the most of it for now because before we know it, summer vacation will be over and Kathryn will be gone.” She squeezes my hand and I turn to look at her as we head into the cinema. “At least you have someone. I don’t.” The sadness in her eyes kills me. Charli couldn’t sit by and watch us, so she broke it off with Jen.

“Hey.” I stop walking and pull her into a hug. “We’re in this together, okay? I know this situation sucks, but we’ll make it work.” Jen’s arms clamp around my waist as she leans into me, laying her head to my chest. This sucks. I hate this for us, but I can’t stand her being so damned miserable either, so I break the intensity by saying, “I never realized you’re a total short-ass.” I lean my chin on top of her head. “If you were into guys I’d say you’re the perfect height for—”

“Hey!” Jen steps back, balls her hand into a fist, and smacks me on the shoulder. “I dare you to finish that sentence.” I try to control the smile, as does Jen. “In all this time you never made me being gay about anything sexual.”

“Whoa.” I take a step backward with my hands up in surrender. “All I was going to say is you’d be the perfect height to tie my shoelaces.” She squints at me and screws up her mouth. “Maybe that’s not exactly what I was going to say.”

Jen steps forward and punches me in the shoulder again. “Don’t be a dick, and take my damn hand.” She aggressively extends her hand and I flinch backward.

“You’re a little scary for a short-ass.”

Jennifer snickers but she tugs me along to the cinemas. Once inside, Jen tells me she needs to head to the bathroom and breaks away.

“Where’s Jen?” Liam asks as he looks around, joining me.

“Bathroom. Kathryn?” I dart my gaze around him in case she’s behind Liam.

“She’s meeting us here, she said she was doing something with her mom.”

“Let’s get tickets.” Liam and I head up to buy tickets for us and the girls, and by the time we’re done, both Jen and Kathryn are standing together, talking. My eyes are locked on Kathryn as we head over to the girls. I can’t seem to stop staring at her. Her beauty can only be rivaled by...well, nothing. “Kathryn,” I say as I step into her space and place a kiss to her cheek. I close my eyes and take in the subtle aroma of sweet candied apples. I push my body into hers, trying to suck as much of her in as I can.

Someone clears their throat from behind, causing me to snap my eyes open and pull away, though I cannot stop staring into her dark, hypnotic eyes. “Bennett,” Liam’s deep voice cuts through the air.

“My apologies,” I say. I turn to Jen and hand her the ticket.

“Dude,” Jen says. “You can’t do that in public.”

“I know,” I say, internally scolding myself.

“Your heart is way too big for your body, Bennett. It’s obvious you two belong together. Let me tell my parents and get this over and done with. Then you won’t have to pretend anymore.”

“No,” I say with certainty. “A year of us pretending versus a lifetime of you being miserable? I’d rather deal with the first, wouldn’t you?”

“Don’t worry about me.”

“I have to agree with Bennett,” Liam says.

“So do I,” Kathryn adds. “This is the right thing to do.”

“One person versus three people being unhappy,” Jen attempts to reason.

“Hey,” I say. “I like you, you’re like the sister I never had. I’m not unhappy *with you*.” I point toward Jen as we continue walking toward theater number four where our movie will start soon. “It’s the situation.”

“Besides, when was the last time your parents stopped to ask you what you wanted?” Kathryn asks Jen. Jen’s features soften as she lowers her chin. “Exactly. Although this isn’t perfect, it’s what needs to happen. Because they’ll leave you alone once Bennett cheats on you and breaks your heart. You just need to play your part.”

Jen slowly nods before she lifts her head and looks between us all. “None of you have to do this, so I really want to thank you. This is a horrible way to live life. But, thank you. I know the end result will leave me happier.”

I drape my arm around Jen’s shoulder and bring her in to place a kiss to her temple. “You’re welcome.”

We walk into the cinema and sit toward the back. Jen sits to my left, Kathryn on my right, and Liam beside Kathryn. The lights dim, and I inch my hand closer to Kathryn until I lay it on her thigh. Out of my peripheral vision, I see her turn to look at me. A beautiful smile splits her angelic face and her warm hand rests over mine.

My heartbeat quickens as my imagination runs away with all the things I want to do with Kathryn. I shift in my seat when it becomes *uncomfortable* being so close to Kathryn without being able to act upon my feelings.

Two hours of sitting beside the girl I've been in love with from the moment I saw her is pure torture. I want nothing more than to tilt her chin toward me and kiss her plump lips. But we haven't had a moment to ourselves since we began on this journey.

What am I doing?

I should be saying screw Jen and let her fight her own battles. I could be with Kathryn right now, we could be in one another's arms and I could be worshipping her body. But instead, we have to sneak around.

I haven't watched one moment of the movie, and in truth, I'm not interested. All I want is to be with my girl. Right now. To have her in my arms, to kiss her mouth, her body. My heart hasn't calmed its frantic rhythm since I've been beside her.

Although I'm thankful when the movie finishes because it means I can move around and hopefully let my hard-on go down, I'm also disappointed because I don't get to hold my girl's hand anymore.

"I'm hungry," Liam announces.

Yes, food. More time with Kathryn. "I can eat," I say.

"Me too." Jen places her hand to her stomach and nods.

"I'm all for food," Kathryn adds.

"Cheese pizza for me," Jen says. We all agree on where to go for pizza, and meet at the spot.

Once we're all inside, seated, and our orders have been taken, Liam sits straighter and smiles. "I have an idea."

"Oh God," I whisper.

"Hey, you're going to like this idea." He kicks me under the table.

"What is it?"

"Well." Liam looks around to ensure no one is listening, and he leans forward to say in a low voice. "My parents are going to Delaware this weekend, and I'll have the house to myself."

“So?” Jen asks.

“I’m thinking maybe I can hang out with Jason on Saturday night.” Liam looks to me and smirks.

It takes me a few seconds, but I click on to what he’s insinuating. I turn to Kathryn and say, “Would you like to have dinner with me on Saturday night?”

Her cheeks turn pink but she eventually nods. “I’d like that.”

“Good. So, I’ll text you the address,” Liam says to Kathryn. “And you know where the spare key is, and the code for the alarm,” he says to me.

“Wow,” Jen says with a smile. We all turn toward her. “This.” She gestures toward Kathryn and me. “Makes me feel better, because I know, I’m not stopping you from being together.”

“We just have to keep it secret, for now,” I add.

I was mentally torturing myself, attempting to think of a way this could work. Stolen moments, that’s how.

For now that’s all we have, but I can wait.

I guess I really don’t have any other options. Not unless I want to throw Jen to the wolves. And that’s not me. I won’t do it.

KATHRYN

Stupid, stupid me. Bennett Adams wasn't meant to happen. I was supposed to go to high school, then college to study statistics. Afterward, I was going to get a job as a financial analyst and work my way up.

I had a plan. Well, it's more Mom's plan than mine, but at least it was a plan.

A God damned plan into which Bennett Adams has thrown a major monkey wrench.

Damn him.

Damn him a thousand flea-ridden bites on his stupid nether regions.

How dare he be selfless and insist on seeing this ruse through. Why does he have to be so damned perfect?

"Ugh." I pick my pillow up and scream into it. I stand and throw the pillow onto the bed, then pace back and forth in my room. I shouldn't be going to Liam's house tonight, I should stay home, and break it off with him. "Pffft," I scoff at myself. "Break up with someone you're not actually dating." I stand in front of my mirror and shake my head. "You're an idiot." I lift my hand and point at the reflection. "Right." I lower my hand, lift my chin and pull my shoulders back. "End this now before it gets out of hand. You're going to Stanford. He's going to Yale until he can transfer. What happens if you meet someone else? What happened to your original plans?" I shake my head and roll my eyes. "Stupid, stupid girl."

I sink to the floor and bury my head in my hands. I'll go to Liam's, have dinner with Bennett, and tell him it's over. I can't let my heart dictate my future.

"Come on," I say to myself. I lower my hands and look at my reflection

in the mirror. “Do it fast and forget him.”

I stand to my feet, take several deep breaths, and decide that I *have* to break this off before anyone gets hurt. “You’ve got this, Kathryn.” I swallow the lump in the throat and nod at my reflection. “You can do this.” I give myself the once-over before heading out. I leave Mom a note on the kitchen counter letting her know I’ll be back later, but I might beat her home. It’s probably best that Mom had to go into the bank after hours to catch up on work, because I don’t think I’ll be in the best mood when I return home. I really don’t want her to worry for me.

It’s best I get this over with now.

— * —

I sit in the car for a moment trying to calm my erratic breathing and shaky hands. For a split second, I question why I’m even here. It’s not like Bennett and I have had a date, or are even a couple. He’s with Jen, who’s gay, but he wants me. So Liam has to pretend he’s with me, because Bennett feels protective of Jen. I mean, come on, what a convoluted situation.

Besides, anything can happen in a year, and I don’t want to be the cause of holding anyone back. That’s not who I am.

“You can do this,” I whisper to myself as I lower my head and stare at my trembling hands. I take several deep breaths before finding the courage to leave the car and walk to the front door.

Fiddling with tendrils of my hair, I quickly dart my hand out to ring the doorbell and take a small step backward. The door opens and I’m greeted with Bennett wearing a gray t-shirt and loose jeans that somehow look amazing on his tall, muscular body. *Nope, don’t look.*

“Kathryn,” he says in a low husky voice. “Come in, please.” Bennett steps aside to grant me access.

I swallow the nervousness sitting at the base of my throat and hesitantly enter the beautiful house. I look around as I rub my right hand up and down my left arm. I feel like I’m going to be sick. “Liam’s house is beautiful.”

“I’m sorry we have to do this here, but with my parents and Jen—”

I lift my hand to stop him. “I think it’s best we talk,” I start. I can’t seem

to calm my hammering heart. “I’ve been thinking about this and maybe if we ___”

Bennett cuts me off by saying, “Let’s have dinner and we can talk about anything you like.”

“Bennett.” I lower my chin as I shake my head.

“I cooked. Given, I’m not sure if it’s edible, but...I cooked.” I look up to his tall frame and smile. That’s cute. “I’m so going to guilt you into staying here and eating with me.”

“You’re doing an exceptional job.”

Walking backward, he gestures for me to follow. “This way.”

Hesitantly, I follow where Bennett leads and find myself in the dining room which is set with plates, flatware, two burning candles, and fresh roses in a crystal vase. Great, now I feel even worse because I’ve come to break it off with him. “Wow.”

“I did that.” He puffs his chest out and points to the table.

“Is this what being in a relationship with you means?”

“Absolutely.” My smile fades as I stare at the effort he’s gone to. “Sit, please.” He pulls a seat out for me and waits until I’m seated before pushing it in. “I’ll be back in a second.”

When Bennett disappears, I loll my head back and close my eyes. How have I gotten myself in this predicament? I should’ve said what I had to say, gotten into my car and left. It would’ve been over by now. But *noooo*. I decided to let my heart lead me. I’m such an idiot.

“Now, I hope you like meatloaf.” I turn to see Bennett walking out of the kitchen holding a tray with oven mitts.

“Sure.”

“And, I also made a Cobb salad.” He places the meatloaf in front of me, and I’m blown away by how good it looks and smells. “Hang on.” He rushes back to the kitchen, and when he returns, he’s holding a bowl. “Cobb salad,” he announces with pride. He places it beside the meatloaf, then sits and gestures for me to begin. “Please.”

There’s a pressing need in the pit of my stomach to talk to him, tell him how I’m feeling. But like the coward I am, I push that aside and slice into the meatloaf. “This really is quite impressive. I had no idea you could cook.”

“Oh, I can’t. I Googled easy recipes and found the ones that looked least complicated.”

I chuckle at his honesty. “You could lie and say you’re a master at

everything.”

He wags his finger at me. “I’m not keen on lying.”

“But that’s exactly what we’re doing when it comes to you and Jen.”

“That’s different,” he says as he piles the food onto his plate.

“How so?”

“I’m doing that because it’s the right thing to do.”

I crinkle my forehead, unsure what he means. “Again, how so?” I repeat.

He looks at his food, and picks at the salad before laying his fork on the side of the plate. “You don’t come from a political background, do you?” I shake my head. “My father is a senator, my grandfather was one, as was my great-grandfather. Jen’s family is the same. Old political blood.”

I screw my mouth up as I watch Bennett intently. “So, generations of politics. Check—got it.”

“It’s all about perception.” I dart my eyes around the dining room, trying to figure out what exactly Bennett is trying to convey. “Jen comes from prime bloodlines, as do I. If an Adams marries a Marshall, it’s nearly guaranteed that I can go the whole way.”

“As in president?” I ask. Bennett nods slowly. “Do you want that though?”

“I do.”

“Why?” I sit back in my chair, my food now abandoned.

“Because I think I can make a difference.”

“How?”

Bennett mimics my posture and crosses his arms in front of his chest as he lifts his chin and stares up at the corner of the room. “I want to be a president who makes the headlines for the right reasons.”

“Give me an example.”

“First of all, I want universal health care.”

“Whoa,” I say as I half laugh. “That’s loaded, Bennett. Next thing you’ll say is about gun reform.” His brows quickly dart up as a small smile tugs the corner of his lips. “There’s no way you’ll be elected with those selling points.”

“Probably not, I know. But it’s worth a try, don’t you think?”

“You won’t get backing from anyone.”

Bennett chuckles as he sits forward and begins to poke at his food. “And here you said you have no political background.”

“That’s just common sense.”

Bennett looks at me and smiles. “Don’t you think it’s time we stop leaving our futures to corporations and archaic thinking? I do.”

“What does your father have to say about this? He’s staunch in his beliefs, and from my knowledge of what I’ve seen of him on TV, he wouldn’t support this.”

“I know.” He lowers his chin. “He’s the one pushing me to marry Jen. Jen’s father is pushing her to marry me, because both sets of parents believe I have a future. Besides, it’s all about perception. If a Marshall and an Adams marry, then we become political royalty.”

“You’re missing the point here, Bennett. You can announce your intention to run, but if there’s no support for you in the primaries you’re not going to get anywhere. It’ll be a waste of time and money.”

He pulls his shoulders back and looks me dead in the eyes. “I’ll get there, Kathryn. But it’ll be with you by my side, not Jen.”

“Here we go again. It doesn’t matter who’ll be standing beside you, without the party support you won’t get through.”

“What do you think about what I want to focus on?”

I lift my brows and click my tongue to the roof of my mouth. “I think they’re important issues, but not what will win the presidency.”

“I’ll have the support of the people.”

“That’s not enough, and you know it,” I say. “You need your father’s backing, and Jennifer’s father’s backing.” I shake my head as I stare at the food. “I can see it now, why they’re trying so hard to match you together.”

“So do I,” Bennett admits. “But it’s not for the right reason. Jen’s gay and doesn’t want this. Nor do I. I want you.”

I pick my fork up and spear some of the salad onto it. The silence between us feels solid and seems to last for an eternity. I’m not acknowledging or replying to his statement. It would be so much easier if I just bit the bullet and pulled the Band-Aid off quickly.

All my plans are being thrown out the window, and I hate how I’m questioning everything.

“What’s going on in that beautiful head of yours?” Bennett asks softly.

“This isn’t how it’s supposed to be.”

“What are you talking about?”

“There are so many things I wish I could change or do over.”

“Like what?” Bennett reaches toward me for my hand. “Talk to me.”

“We’re young, Bennett, we should be having the time of our lives and

I'm sitting here overthinking everything."

"Is it us?"

"Us. Me. Everything." I gesture toward him, then point to me. "I had a plan, and you've come along and scrambled that plan up."

"What was it?"

"Finish college, get a job as a financial analyst and work my way to the top of my field."

"You like statistics and numbers?"

I worry my lower lip between my teeth as I stand and move over in front of the window. I lean against the wall and wrap my arms around my torso. "Not particularly," I say with a snicker. "But I'm good at it. Like really good with numbers."

"Then why are you going for a degree in something you don't love?"

I swing around to look at him and find that he too has abandoned his food and has drifted closer to me. "Why are you doing political science?"

"Because I love it and I want to do it. The only thing I'm doing that I don't want to is studying at Yale, and not at Stanford with you." He skims his gaze down my body, before lifting his chin to hold eye contact with me. "Why are you studying something you don't love?" he repeats.

I pivot on the spot to continue looking outside. "Because it'll make Mom happy. If you're good at something, the money will always be there. And I'm good with numbers."

Bennett chuckles from behind me. "What do *you* want to do? Not what your mom wants, but what *you* want?"

I close my eyes as I laugh to myself. "It's going to sound stupid."

"Impossible. Just, tell me."

"I'd like to be a librarian."

"Then do it."

"You don't understand," I say as I turn to stare at Bennett.

"If anyone can understand the pressures of family, it's me. Hell, they'll have me engaged to Jen before I can tell them that I'm leaving Yale to go to Stanford. So, trust me, we're in the same boat. And let me tell you, neither you nor I want to be in that damned boat."

I lift my hands to cover my face as my mind churns with a thousand and one thoughts. "It's your fault," I say from behind my hands.

"Why is it my fault?" Bennett tugs on my hands and once I lower them, he places his finger under my chin and tilts my head up. "Why?"

“Because you went and did one of the most selfless things a person can ever do. You’re willing to be the bad guy just so Jen can break away from her controlling parents. You’re not supposed to do that.”

Bennett cups my face, and I roll my eyes closed as I lean into his gentle, warm touch. I can’t do this. *He’s too perfect.* “All I’m doing is the right thing. She shouldn’t be forced to marry me because of her name, and I shouldn’t have to marry to advance my career. I don’t want that, but I don’t want her to be anything other than herself, either. Jen deserves to be happy and to have the freedom to love whoever she wants. That’s why I’m doing this.”

I take a step backward from him and straighten. “And that right there is why this can’t ever happen.” I motion between us. “I’m sorry.” I move away from Bennett and start toward the front door.

I manage to crack it open before his hand slams it shut. He turns me and pushes me against the door, pinning me to the cool wood. He sweeps my hair to the side and lowers his head until his mouth is at my ear. “Are you losing faith in us? Or are you falling in love with me the way I’m in love with you?”

My breath hitches as I push myself into his body, loving the way he feels on me. “We haven’t even been on a date. How could you love me?”

“I knew from the moment I saw you that you’d be my wife.”

“Bennett, please,” I beg in a breathy voice.

“What is it?” The hurt on his face is obvious.

“It’s too much. I can’t do this.”

“Do what?” He takes a small step backward.

“This.” I gesture between us. “I’m not even seventeen yet, and here you are declaring your love for me and laying out our future together.”

“Wait, what?” Bennett retracts further and holds his hands up. “How old are you?”

“I’ll be seventeen in September.”

“How is that possible? You’re a senior who’s graduating. I thought you were eighteen or nearly eighteen.”

“I started school early, and I also skipped a year.” Bennett furrows his brows as his features harden. “I told you, I’m good at math.”

“How good?”

“Exceptionally. And to tell you the truth, being an analyst is below what my mom wants me to do to.” I’m getting sidetracked, not really wanting to discuss my age any more. But, judging by Bennett’s horrified look, I think he

does want to talk about it. “I’m sorry, I should’ve told you.”

“I thought you were my age.”

I hang my head in shame. I probably should’ve told him earlier. “It’s barely two years between us, Bennett.” I look out the window again and take a sharp breath. “Besides, I came here today to break this off with you.”

“What?” Bennett’s posture stiffens as he lifts his chin.

“It’s not going to work,” I say adamantly. “And now, clearly, my age is a point of concern for you.” I pull my shoulders back and run my hands over my clothes, smoothing them out. “I’ll keep the secret. You don’t have to worry about me. But this is over.” I motion between us again. “Not like it ever really started.” I walk over to Bennett and place a kiss to the corner of his lips. “All I want is for you and Jen to be happy.” I take a step back and turn around. “Goodbye, Bennett.”

He doesn’t try to stop me, or even call out. Obviously, we were never meant to be together in the first place.

BENNETT

Liam and I are out in the back playing basketball. “Have you called Kathryn?” Liam asks as he passes the ball to me.

I dribble the ball toward the hoop and shoot. “No.”

“It’s nearly the end of vacation. You’re just going to leave it alone?”

“Yep.” I bounce the ball a few times before grabbing it and throwing it at Liam.

Liam grunts when he catches it. “Basically what you’re saying is you’d rather be miserable than call her.”

“What do you want me to do? She broke it off with me.”

“Broke it off?” Liam echoes in an elevated tone. “You hadn’t even started yet.”

He throws the ball back at me with equal venom, and I catch it and squeeze the fucking thing between my hands. “She was right. It couldn’t work out for us. Besides she’s not even seventeen.”

“You’re hung up about the age difference? Age is nothing in this case, Bennett. She’s smarter than you and I combined. Besides.” He steps backward off the court. “I think the real reason you’re like this is because you told her you love her and she didn’t respond the same way.”

“Fuck off.” I peg the ball at him and walk off the court. I pick my t-shirt up and wipe at the sweat clinging to my body. “It has nothing to do with that.” It does, because I scared her and she ran away. I told her I was in love with her, and she backed away from me.

“So why have you been an ass lately?”

“What?” I shrug back into my damp t-shirt. then look around for the ball. “I haven’t been anything.”

“Yeah?” Liam challenges as he grabs the ball. He walks beside me back into the house. “You’ve been an ass to me, and to Jen.”

“No, I haven’t,” I counter. I open the fridge and grab two bottles of water, tossing one toward Liam.

“Jen told me that last night at the club, you snapped at her while your families were having dinner. She said she asked you if you’re excited about college and you said, and I quote...” Liam places his water on the counter and air quotes, *‘What the hell do you think, Jennifer?’* He lifts his brows at me. “Is that what you said?”

I swipe his bottle of water off the counter in anger. “That’s not exactly how it was said.”

“But you did in fact say those words to her?” I gulp as I avert my eyes, refusing to look at Liam. “I take that as confirmation.”

I run my hand through my sweat-soaked hair and shake my head. “She fucking broke it off with me, Liam. What am I supposed to do?”

Liam screws his mouth up before bending to pick up the water bottle. “You have two choices, you can keep being a jerk, or you can pull your head out of your ass and tell her you’re hurting without her.”

“I...”

“Can you see yourself with her in ten years? Twenty years? The rest of your life?”

“She’s right though. She’s not even seventeen, and we’re going off to different colleges. Do you know she doesn’t even want the degree she’s going for? She’d rather be a librarian, but she doesn’t want to disappoint her mother.”

“In fact, I did *not* know that because my best friend has checked out and refuses to talk to me about anything.”

“I want her by my side, Liam.” That admission hurts so much. “I fucking love her.”

“Or you’re obsessed,” he says.

I lean against the counter and pinch the bridge of my nose. “Maybe that’s all this is. An unhealthy obsession. Maybe she’s right.” I lower my hand and slowly lift my shoulders. “Maybe we’re not meant to be.”

Liam walks over toward me and claps a hand on my shoulder. “The Bennett Adams I know would do anything for the people he loves. This version of him”—he waves his hand up and down my torso—“is being a fucking wimp. Pull yourself together, and tell her. You’ve moped around

here long enough, don't you think?"

Liam's been my best friend since I can remember, and he's always unashamedly spoken his mind with me. "You're right." I push off the counter and head toward my room. "I'm going to take a shower, then I'm driving over to her house and I'm telling her."

"About fucking time," Liam grumbles from behind me. His words make me smirk. *Bastard.*

—*—

I knock on Kathryn's door and take a step back, waiting for her to open it. When there's no answer, I knock once again. My confidence is quickly dwindling with every moment I'm standing outside her house.

What feels like hours later, the door opens and I'm greeted by the most breathtaking person I've ever seen. Kathryn's dark hair is pulled back in a loose bun, she has a pencil wedged behind her ear, and she's wearing the most unflattering clothes a woman could ever wear. But it doesn't matter to me, she could be wearing a potato sack; I'd still love her.

"What are you doing here?" Kathryn asks as her brows furrow.

I step forward, push my fingers through her hair, and bring her in toward me. I lower my head and take her mouth with mine. Kathryn instantly softens as I link my other arm around her back and draw her closer to me. Our bodies are pushed into one another as we stand in the doorway, kissing with heat and passion. I want her, for now and forever. There's no doubt in my mind that Kathryn will be my wife. I pull back and slink my hand to cup her cheek, my thumb tenderly stroking her skin. "I'll wait a God damned lifetime for you, Kathryn."

She rapidly blinks several times as she stares at me. "Bennett this..."

I lower my head and take her mouth again. There's no use in using words to show Kathryn how much I love her. She needs to feel what I do. A small whimper of want vibrates from my girl, and I smile against her lips before pulling back. "We're not over as far as I'm concerned. We've only just begun. In one year, I'm moving to be close to you. Whether you do your analyst degree or a librarian degree, I'm going to support you. But, know this.

I'm yours, and you're mine." I place my forehead to hers. "This will never be over because I love you." I take a deep breath, pull back, and place a kiss on her forehead. I take a step back and lift my chin. "There's no doubt in my mind, we're going to work out."

Kathryn smirks as her dark eyes look up into mine. "You won't have to wait a lifetime, only the year."

"Not even then." I turn and head back to my car. "By the way, I'll be back at six to take you on a date."

Her sinful body leans against the doorjamb and she crosses her arms in front of her chest. "I'm busy," she teases.

"Hell yeah you are—with me. Six. Be ready."

Kathryn releases a small chuckle before leaning away from the door and closing it.

She's mine. Now and forever.

— * —

"Where are we going?" Kathryn asks as I drive toward our destination.

My right hand releases the wheel, and I lay it on her thigh. "Somewhere."

"Are you going to tell me or do I have to guess?"

"You can guess."

I glance over at her and she rolls her eyes. Her warm hand rests on top of mine. "Are we going to a museum?"

"Nope."

"A library."

Damn it, why didn't I think to research quirky little libraries and take her to one? "Nope."

"Movies?" she asks with hesitation.

"Nope."

"I don't know." She shrugs and huffs. "Can you give me a hint?"

"Nope."

"You're no fun," Kathryn protests.

"I'm heaps of fun. Look at all these questions I'm refusing to answer." Kathryn snickers and shakes her head. "We're nearly there."

She stares out the window and leans her head against the glass. “Is it safe?” she asks in a small voice. “I don’t want Jen outed, it’s not fair to her. Actually, it’s not fair to you either. Neither of you should have to do this.”

“You’re right. We shouldn’t. But that’s the hand Jen and I have been dealt. In a year it will all be different. We’ll move closer to you, and away from our parents, which’ll give Jen some breathing space. You and I can be together, and because we’re so far away from both sets of parents, they’ll be none the wiser.”

Kathryn exhales a low, long breath. “If only everything was that perfect.” She looks over to me and squeezes my hand. “But even if this only lasts for now, I’ll take it.”

“What made you change your mind?” I ask as I navigate the last five minutes toward our destination.

“You did. I don’t want my first love to be so tragic that it ended before it started.”

She loves me. “You love me?” I damn near smash the brakes just so I can hold her.

“You’ve proven to be a good person, and I can’t deny the feelings I’m developing.” I beam a massive smile, ecstatic to hear those words tumble from Kathryn’s lips. I pull into the long driveway and head around the back of the house. “Where are we?”

“This is Bette and Benjamin Doyle’s house.”

Kathryn tilts her head to get a better look at the massive estate. “Crazy, isn’t it?”

“What?”

“Wouldn’t it be nice to be like the Doyles?” Kathryn says when I stop the car. She moves to open the door, and when she does she takes a deep breath. “Mom said they’re one of the wealthiest families on the East Coast.”

“She knows them?” I ask as I move to the trunk.

“She’s a banker. She knows a lot of people.” Kathryn laughs as she looks around the estate. “Rivers of gold,” she says and smirks. “That’s how Mom describes the Doyles and a few other affluent families.” She turns to see me taking a box out of the trunk. “What are we doing here, and how do you know them?”

“Well, they’re friends of the family. My father knows them, and they’re big donors to Dad.”

“Aha, I see. You asked a favor.”

“Not exactly.” I slow cheeky smile tugs at my lips. “Kinda.”

“It’s either not exactly or kind of. There’s no in between.”

“Mom and Dad think this is for Jen. So, I had to pick up Jen, and she’s hanging with Liam, while Dad called and asked if I could use the grounds to take my girl for a picnic.”

Kathryn lifts her hand to cover her mouth, but I can see the smile lighting up her angelic face. “You, Liam and Jen are all in on it, while your parents and her parents think it’s you and Jen here?” I nod proudly at my sneakiness. “And what happens if either set of parents decide to slip over and see what’s happening?”

“We’re not thinking of worst-case scenario this evening, Kathryn.”

She laughs and shakes her head. “What’s in the box?”

“Food.”

“Did you cook?” My mouth contorts as I balance and hold the box with one arm, and reach for her hand with the other. “I see.” She links our fingers as I lead her to the perfectly manicured garden. “Wow,” she says when she looks over the greenery. “The garden is so vast and bright. It’s more than a garden. It’s a showpiece. This should be in magazines. Look at that massive water feature that runs nearly half a mile down the center. This place would be amazing at night, with all the lights. Wow, look at all the fruit trees lining this magnificent garden. They could easily charge a small entry fee and let families come and enjoy a picnic for the day.”

I love how enthusiastic Kathryn is about something as simple as the garden. “They do allow friends and family to visit. They’re not here at the moment, they’re traveling overseas somewhere. But, they like Dad, and were happy for me to have access.”

“What a shame this isn’t available to everyone.” She looks at the box, then drops my hand and runs ahead. “Here. This is where we should set up.” She picks the biggest tree with the greenest of leaves and twirls under it. “This is perfect.” There’s a growing sensation in my chest as I walk toward her. Kathryn simply takes my breath away with how flawlessly beautiful she is.

“So, this is the one, is it?” I ask as I lower the box to the lush green grass.

“This is it. Look.” She raises her arms over her head and wiggles her fingers as she stands on her tiptoes to touch the leaves. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Yes, you are.” The instant the words leave my mouth, I know how corny they sound, but I can’t help it when I’m with her.

Kathryn lowers her arms to her sides and drops her chin so she's looking at the ground. "That was really bad." She lifts her head to meet my eyes. "There was some hardcore cheese factor there."

I break out into a deep guttural laugh. "As soon as I said it, I thought it was corny."

"Oh, it was." She shakes her head and laughs. "Should we set up?"

I open the top of the box and produce a picnic blanket. "Here." I hand it to her to spread on the ground. Then, once she's seated, I begin to take out the containers of food. "Our cook made the food."

"At least you didn't try to take credit for it."

"I give credit where credit is due." I stretch my legs out in front of me, and Kathryn turns to sit cross-legged facing me. "There's a selection of baguette sandwiches, and a few different salads."

"Wow! How many people are you expecting?" Kathryn asks as she looks at all the food laid out between us. "This is enough for at least two or three days."

"Whatever we don't eat, we can throw."

"Throw it?"

"Yeah, in the trash."

"You're going to throw perfectly good food away?" Her features soften and her shoulders slump. "How about whatever we don't eat, we give to someone who might not know where their next meal is coming from?"

My mouth falls open and I tilt my head to the side, staring into her molten brown eyes. "I'm not even sure that is possible."

"Donating food to people?" She wrinkles her nose as if she's disgusted with me.

"Nope. Not that." I can't tear my eyes off of her. "I think I'm even more in love with you."

Kathryn's cheeks glow with a hint of pink. "You can't say things like that, Bennett."

"Why?"

"Because it's not fair."

"Why?" I repeat.

She leans her arms back and tilts her head to the side, while maintaining strong eye contact. "You might be a dud kisser, and then that's it for us. But you'll be all broken up because I don't want to date you anymore," she says playfully.

“Oh, is that so?” I match her energetic, teasing vibe. “I kissed you once before, was I bad then?”

She smirks and playfully nips on her lower lip. “Well, here you are head over heels in love with me, and you really could suck.” She sweeps her hand motioning my face.

“You could be a terrible kisser too,” I shoot right back.

Kathryn’s mouth gapes as she lifts her hand to rest over her heart. “Now you’ve hurt my feelings, and I don’t think I *want* to kiss you anymore.” She shakes her head and clicks her tongue to the roof of her mouth. “What a shame you’ll never know how good a kisser I actually am.”

“I’m going to kiss you.”

“Pffft.” She rolls her eyes and flicks her hand dismissively. “No thanks.” Kathryn picks up one of the baguettes and unwraps it. “This on the other hand, looks delicious.” She moves to lift it to her lips and mumbles, “Unlike you.” She takes a bite and stares at me.

She’s so damn adorable. It’s my turn to tease her. “You know, you’re right. I really *don’t* want to kiss you, that one time was more than enough.”

She chews and swallows what’s in her mouth as I take a bite of one of the remaining baguettes. “I know what you’re doing, mister. And it’s not going to work.”

“Me?” I say while still chewing. I quickly swallow and raise my brows while staring into her breathtaking eyes. “I’m just saying, you’re not really that kissable. Besides, I can’t imagine you’re good at it.”

“I beg your pardon.” Kathryn’s pitch elevates. “You’re probably a horribly sloppy kisser. All tongue and saliva and toothy.” She bares and clinks her teeth. “Or worse,” she pauses and pokes her tongue out. “You’ve got garlic or onion breath.” She closes her mouth and puffs out her cheeks. “That’s gross.”

“Maybe *you* have garlic breath.”

While maintaining eye contact, Kathryn shrugs, then bites into her baguette. She’s so playful, and I love it. When she finishes chewing she cocks a brow and says, “I guess you’ll never know.” Her pink tongue peeps out and sweeps across her lower lip, catching a discarded crumb. Kathryn lowers her baguette and stands to her feet. She begins stepping backward. “What a shame, because I know for a fact, I’m the best kisser you *would’ve* had. But you’ve lost your chance now.” She takes off running.

When she looks over her shoulder at me, my heart stops. There’s no

doubt in my mind at all. I *will* marry Kathryn. I jump to my feet and take off after her. Kathryn might be petite in stature, but she's fast. As soon as I catch up to her, I grab her around the hips and pin her with my body up against a tree.

Kathryn arches her back, pushing her chest into mine. "I'm going to kiss you, Kathryn," I say as I lower my head and skim my mouth against hers.

Kathryn's breath hitches as her lips slightly part, and she moves her eyes down to my mouth before lifting her gaze to meet my eyes. "Maybe I don't want you to kiss me." She arches a brow as her eyes dart to my mouth, then to my eyes again.

She's making me crazy with her sinful dark eyes and tight body pushing into mine. I lift my left arm and cage her between the tree and myself while my right hand grips her hip. "Then I won't kiss you." I lean down and skim my nose across the nape of her neck. Kathryn moans as she angles her head to the side to allow me access. "Are you sure you don't want me to kiss you, Kathryn?" I tighten my grip on her hip.

"Don't you dare kiss me, Bennett Adams. I don't want any part of you on me." She snakes her hand around my waist and pulls me in closer.

"I'll spend my life *not* kissing you." I inhale deeply, and I'm rewarded with the perfect aroma of coconut. "You changed your shampoo. Keep using this one, I like it."

"If you like it, then I'll change it," she says in a wickedly sexy voice.

I hold her gaze, wanting to do nothing more than take her, right here under this damn tree. "I'm *not* going to kiss you." I lower my head and skim my lips against hers.

"Don't kiss me, Bennett." Her hot breath mingles with my own.

"I won't." I lean in further until our mouths are pressed together.

"Don't," she whispers and contorts her body further into mine. Kathryn's tongue peeps out and sweeps across my lower lip, silently giving me permission to deepen our kiss. She pushes her fingers through my hair and balls her hand. "Don't you dare."

"Never." She closes her eyes and leans into me, giving me the opportunity I've been dreaming about. I claim her mouth, owning her with our sensual kiss.

With her hand fisted in my hair, she brings me even closer until our bodies are smashed together. The kiss becomes desperate, and if I don't pull back now, I'm afraid I'll want to tear her out of her clothes and fuck her right

here. But she deserves so much more than that. I pull back and lean my forehead on hers. “I have to stop,” I say between deep breaths.

“I think that’s a good idea.”

“Your first time should be—”

“What? My first time? You mean my first time with you?” she cuts my sentence off to ask.

Her words surprise me. “You’re not a virgin?”

She lifts her brows and smirks. “Are you?”

“That’s different.”

“Either you are or you’re not.”

“No, I’m not.”

“And how old were you when you had sex for the first time?” she asks.

“The day after my sixteenth birthday.”

“Aha.” She lifts her hand to wave it at me as she moves off the tree and begins walking back to where the picnic is set. “So, why should I be any different? It’s okay for guys to have sex at sixteen—or even younger—but it’s not for us?”

“That’s not what I was saying.”

“Then what?” She stops walking and places a hand on her hip while looking up at me.

“I just didn’t think you were that type of girl.” Her gaping mouth, high brows, big eyes, and head tilt tell me I probably shouldn’t have said that. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Well, you sound like a highly judgmental, entitled white man. Just so I’m clear, you do it and you’re a stud, I do it and I’m a slut?”

I pinch the bridge of my nose as I lower my head and exhale the frustration. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be so damn judgmental of people, Bennett.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and slowly nod. “I know, I did judge you. And, not that I’m trying to excuse it, but your admission surprised me.”

“Just remember what were you doing at sixteen? Why should others be different?”

Kathryn’s right, that’s exactly what I did. I judged her on something I did myself. “I’m sorry,” I apologize again.

“Apology accepted, now, let’s eat.” She reaches for my hand, and a massive weight lifts off my shoulders. We head back to the picnic where we spend hours talking about everything and anything.

By the end of the night, there's one thing I know absolutely. I love Kathryn more with every breath I take.

KATHRYN

College has started and I'm damned miserable.

I hate that Bennett and I have to sneak around. I also hate the fact he's on the opposite side of the country. And I hate this damn degree I'm doing.

But the thing I hate most of all is that every day is miserable. If Bennett was with me, it would all be a little more bearable, but all we can do is text and FaceTime.

Luckily, my dorm roommate is the thing that's getting me through. Faith couldn't be any more opposite to me. She's loud, bubbly, has numerous piercings, many tattoos, and hair that's changed color twice in the week we've been here. And man, is she one messy roommate. But, she's so beautiful and accepting of everyone. It also helps that we get on like we've been living together for years instead of days.

"You have to stop moping around," Faith says when she walks into our room and sees me sitting on the bed working on my laptop.

"I'm working," I say as I glance up to see she's changed her hair color for a third time. "I like this one the best so far." I point to her lilac hair.

"Yeah, I like it too." She walks over to stand in front of the mirror and tilts her head from side to side. She then pivots and walks over to my bed, where she plonks down. "We should go out."

"No can do. I've already got two papers due in two weeks."

"Already?" Faith screws up her nose.

"Uh-huh." I glance at her, then back to my laptop screen. "It's crazy."

"What's crazy is you being so damn serious. Come on, let's go out tonight. There's a cool bar in town that we can go to."

"Nope, I'm not going. If I don't get a head start on these, then I'm going

to fall behind, and I don't want to do that. Besides, there's this other thing called *underaged*." I exhale a large breath and lean back against the wall. Closing my eyes I rub them to relieve the strain.

"Girl, there's so much more to life than keeping up with lectures and papers."

I open my eyes and offer Faith a small smile. "You go, because I wouldn't be very good company anyway. I'm feeling sorry for myself."

Faith pushes up off the bed and snorts and stares at me. "Clearly." She makes a circular movement with her hand. "You need to have more fun in your life. Meet a guy, or a girl." She lifts one shoulder and smiles. "Or a guy *and* a girl and have lots of fun with them."

"How about I live vicariously through you?"

Faith lifts her chin with confidence. "Maybe." She walks over to her side of the room and grabs her duffel bag from the end of her bed. "It's our first Friday night here, you should live a little. Are you sure you don't want to come out with me tonight?"

"Nah. I'm okay." Besides it's my birthday, and I'm feeling even more emotional and miserable considering Bennett can't be with me. "Go and have fun, and tell me all the juicy details."

Faith keeps throwing things in her duffel. "The thing is, I won't be back until Sunday."

"You already had plans?" I'm confused.

She snickers and shakes her head. "Hell no. I'm going to a bar tonight and there's a party tomorrow night. I *will* be hooking up this weekend. And I *will* pick someone up, and I *will* get laid."

I smile at her easy nature. I like how carefree and assertive she is. "Do me one favor," I start. Faith stops packing, waiting for the favor. "Be safe. If you need anything, text or call me."

"You sound like my mother."

"I just want you to be safe."

She rustles around in her duffel, and produces a strip of condoms. "And for extra measure." Faith digs through her bag again and grabs a pack of something, then throws it to me. "The morning after pill for when I'm done with the men."

The men? As in more than one. *Go Faith*. "I'm impressed." I throw the packet back and Faith catches it and drops it in her bag. "I have to say, I think you'd be so much fun to go out with."

“Then come with me.”

I look at the laptop, then back to her, considering her invitation for a hot minute. “Nah, I have too much work to do.”

“Well, if you change your mind, call me and I’ll wait for you.” She finishes packing her bag and heaves it up from the bed. “Well, have fun being a nerd.” She points to the laptop. “You don’t get laid being a nerd.”

“That’s not true.” I smile from behind my laptop.

Faith picks her bag up with a grunt, and heads over to the door. “If you change your mind, call me and I’ll meet you somewhere.”

“Have fun,” I say to her retreating back.

“Oh, trust me, I will.” Faith closes the door, and I spend a few seconds smiling before I return my attention to school work.

— * —

I lay on my stomach on my bed as I talk to Mom. She’s already sung me happy birthday and told me she sent my present late so I should be getting it on Monday. “How are you settling in?”

“I miss home,” I honestly admit. “But, I’m lucky because Faith is awesome.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s gone out.”

“Why didn’t you go with her and celebrate your birthday?”

“I have two papers due in two weeks. I want to make a start on them so I’m not panicking at the last minute.”

“Are you enjoying classes?”

No. “Sure.” My smile hides the truth.

Mom’s phone rings, and she huffs as she looks at it. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but I have to go. Who knew there’d be banking emergencies on a Friday night?”

“That’s okay.” I’m a little hurt she’s taking the call, but I guess it’s best she does or I may have broken down and cried because I don’t want to be here or doing this course. “Love you, Mom.”

“Love you too.”

The video call ends and I feel like I'm ungrateful. I turn over on my bed and stare up at the stark white ceiling. Mom is doing what she thinks will be best for my future. And here I am, feeling sorry for myself. I'm so fortunate to have a hardworking mom who wants what's best for me. *Ugh.*

I'm hating my life at the moment, probably because I feel so lonely. I'm thousands of miles away from Mom and Bennett, and I'm stuck doing something I have no passion for. I grab my pillow and place it over my head. I stay like this until I finally convince myself to keep working on the paper.

I sit up, place the pillow in my lap, and balance my laptop on top of it. I'm reading over what I've written when there's a knock on my door. "Yeah?" They knock again. "What is it?" Their silence is irritating me. "Damn it, I have work to do," I grumble as I place my pillow and the laptop on the bed and stand to answer the door. "What?" I spit as I open the door aggressively. In front of me is a massive bouquet of red roses concealing the face of the delivery person. "Oh my God!" I shriek as I cover my mouth.

"Happy birthday."

The person lowers the flowers and my mouth falls open as I stare at the beautiful man in front of me. "Bennett." I leap into his arms, hugging him so hard I don't ever want to let him go. "What are you doing here?"

"I couldn't let my girl celebrate her birthday without me. So, I'm here."

I pull him into my room and close the door. My body is exploding with happiness and my face is split with the biggest smile. "I can't believe you're here," my voice cracks as I shake my head.

Bennett looks around the room and places the flower arrangement on the desk under the window, then plonks a backpack beside my bed. "Come here." He opens his arms and I latch onto him with everything I have. He runs his hands up and down my back before clasping his warm hands to my cheeks. "I've missed you." He lowers his face until our mouths are connected. Our kiss is slow, yet intoxicating, with silent promises of how we're going to spend tonight. He pulls back and places a small kiss to my temple. "I have something for you."

"I don't need anything, Bennett. I'm just so happy you're here. How long are you staying?"

"I leave first thing Sunday morning." He sits on the edge of the bed and drags his backpack toward him. He unzips it and takes out a small wrapped present. "Happy birthday, Kathryn." He holds it out to me.

"What is it?" I take it but look to him for an answer.

“You need to unwrap it to see. But, judging by the shape, I think it’s a piano.”

I already have tears in my eyes because Bennett is with me, and having him joke nearly forces those tears to spill. “A piano? Wow, I thought it was a car.”

“Open the damn thing.” Bennett reaches across to grab me around the hips and sit me on his lap.

I tear at the wrapping, and open the box. “What?”

“Here.” He holds his hand out to take the box. “It’s the night sky of the day I first saw you and knew I was going to marry you. If you turn it over, there’s the date.”

He holds the round pendant and flips it over so I can see the date etched in with our initials below it in a heart. On the other side is indeed the night sky with all the stars and constellations that were visible that evening—I assume, because I know nothing about astrology. “This is beautiful. Thank you.” I turn on his lap and hold my hair up, indicating that he should fasten it around my neck. “I love it, thank you.”

His big warm hands come around so he can hang it off my neck before he clasps it together. I turn and stare at him. “I love you,” he says and takes my mouth with his.

This feels different. More intense than any other kiss we’ve shared in the past. I turn to straddle his hips while maintaining contact. Our kiss quickly heats and within only moments, we’re tearing at each other’s clothes. “I want this, Bennett.”

He drags his eyes down my naked body and smiles. “Good, because I want this too. Get on the bed.” My stomach flutters as heat rises through me. I lie on the bed, and Bennett opens his backpack and takes out a box of condoms. Bennett places the condoms beside the bed, then checks that the door is locked. When he turns, he smiles while skimming his hooded eyes over my body. “I’m suddenly quite thirsty.” He crawls up on the bed, grabs my ankles, and ducks as he hooks my legs over his shoulders. “So damned thirsty.” He buries his tongue into me, licking and nibbling while I totally relax. “Fuck, you’re perfect,” he mumbles around my pussy. He parts my lips, and presses his face into me while he excitedly tongue fucks me.

I drive my fingers into his hair to urge him to keep doing what he’s doing. “I love your mouth.” I inhale deeply and arch my back when he hits the spot I love most. “That’s it,” I groan.

“I want you to come on my face.”

That’s something I can certainly do if he keeps licking at my clit while his finger is inside me. “More.” I fist his hair and swivel my hips. Bennett’s own groans vibrate through me, and I know he’s loving this as much as I am. A man with his head buried in my pussy is a man worth keeping. “Right there,” I encourage, wanting him to keep doing what he’s doing. Bennett’s tempo increases, and the more he works magic with his tongue, the closer I get to orgasm. I release his hair and just try to savor the moment so he doesn’t stop. I want this to last until the day I die. Bennett has a way with his silvery tongue that’s a pure aphrodisiac. Who needs drugs when Bennett can use his tongue the way he does?

“I want every last drop you give me.”

And that’s it; those words send me over the edge. A sweet cry of pleasure passes my lips, but Bennett’s mouth muffles my moans. My taste is all over him, and even though I should be grossed out, I’m not. Bennett’s been eating me, so I can only be grateful and appreciative.

Bennett lines his cock up with my pussy and pushes in, filling me. “Condom,” I whisper.

“It’s already on.” When did he do that? I close my eyes so I can feel when he starts slowly moving his hips. “Open your eyes, Kathryn. I want to see all of you.”

I open my eyes and keep my gaze glued to his. Bennett’s tempo increases, and he squeezes his eyes shut when he’s just about to come. But then he stops moving. “What’s wrong?” I whisper.

“I want this to last forever.” He kneels back, grabs my leg, and places it over his shoulder before impaling me with his erect, hard cock. “This feels so much better.”

“You have no idea how good it is.” I snake my hand between us so I can rub at my clit, but Bennett smacks my hand away and makes circular motions there with his thumb. I clamp my pussy around him and Bennett groans. “Do that again.” I repeat it and Bennett takes a sharp, short breath. He grabs my hips and digs his fingers into my flesh while he thrusts furiously into me. I clench around him once more, and Bennett groans as he comes.

There’s a vein straining in his neck as he grits his jaw. God, he’s so beautiful. Bennett turns his head and kisses my leg before lowering it to the bed. He stays inside me for a moment, then he moves to lie beside me on the bed. I snuggle into his side and on his outstretched arm.

“Jesus,” he murmurs as he traces lazy shapes on my back with his fingertips.

“I enjoyed that. I think there should be conditions to our relationship.”

Bennett smiles as he moves to drag the covers up our bodies. “Conditions?” A snicker escapes his lips. “What should they be?”

“First, your mouth needs to do that more often.”

“That’s a little difficult to do while I live on the other side of the country. However, when I move here, then yes, my mouth is always available for your pleasure.” He kisses my forehead. “Are there any other terms?”

“You know, let’s start with that one, and we can add to it.”

Bennett hugs me tight to his body. “I need to go to the bathroom so I can dispose of this condom, but I don’t want to move from here.”

“I need to go too. Thankfully, the bathrooms are only at the end of the hall.”

We spend a few moments in silence, entangled in bliss before I move off the bed and wrap my dressing gown around me. Once we’ve both been to the bathroom, we snuggle together in my single bed. I find myself falling asleep wrapped protectively in Bennett’s arms.

I like this. I can get used to being with him.

BENNETT

“The Marshalls should be arriving soon,” Mom says in passing on the way to the kitchen to check the food.

“I know,” I call as I fix my tie and prepare for this fake Christmas onslaught. Thankfully, Kathryn is home for the holidays and she’ll be attending my parents’ ostentatious Christmas party with Liam.

“No, this isn’t what I asked for.”

I turn to look for Dad, but he’s most likely in his office and immune to Mom’s stress around Christmas. I head into the kitchen to find Mom pointing at one of the dishes on the island counter while shaking her head. “Everything okay?” I look to the caterer who’s standing tall taking whatever Mom is saying to her.

“I asked for no cilantro, and look.” She points to a tray of deviled eggs that have a sprinkling of cilantro on top.

“Is this all the cilantro you’ve used?” I ask the caterer.

“It is.” She takes a sharp breath.

“It’s one tray, Mom. Who cares?”

“I care because I asked for it not to be on anything.” Mom looks between me and the caterer, as if she’s waiting for me to say something.

“This is an easy fix.”

“What is?”

I don’t want to show her up in front of the caterer, but she’s seriously losing her mind over one tray of eggs with cilantro? “Leave them in the kitchen, and Liam and I can eat them.” A tray of eggs is certainly not going to have an adverse effect, but it is what it is. The caterer turns to Mom, waiting for her approval. Mom huffs and glances at me before giving the

caterer a small nod. Mom pivots and effortlessly glides out of the kitchen. “Mom,” I say to stop her from losing her shit at someone else for something as trivial as the cilantro. “What was that about?” I point toward the kitchen.

“She included cilantro when I specifically asked for no damned cilantro.”

“This is crazy, even for you. Who cares if one tray of food has cilantro?”

Mom’s eyes widen as she tilts her head to the side. “The Marshalls are coming, and everything needs to be perfect.”

“You think because of the cilantro, that they’re going to storm out of here and refuse to come back?”

“Sometime in the near future you’ll be marrying their daughter, which means we’ll be spending more time together and—”

“Mom.” I step forward and give her a hug. “You stress too much over things that don’t matter.”

“This needs to go well.”

It really doesn’t, because I ain’t marrying Jen. “I know,” I say as I offer her nothing more than a smile. “And it will. But shouting at the people who’ll be feeding us isn’t a smart idea.” A smile splits my face. “Now *I’m* scared to eat the food they’ve made,” I say, trying to lighten Mom’s frantic mood. There has to be more to it than just the damn cilantro. “The house looks amazing.” I sweep my hand across the banister that houses the deep-red decorations. “Honestly, it looks like the North Pole threw up in here. It’s perfect, so you don’t have to worry about anything.”

“Maybe I should’ve done more.”

“Every year you panic about your Christmas party and how everything looks, but this year, you’re over-the-top cray-cray.”

Mom’s mouth flattens and an unimpressed glare flashes across her face. “Cray-cray?” she repeats in a deadpan tone.

“Yep.” I pull my shoulders back as I smirk.

“You’re lucky I love you.” She looks around the foyer at all the Christmas decorations before she advances toward the ten-foot tree. She fixes one decoration and takes a step back. “Everything *does* look exceptional.” Mom continues backward until she’s standing beside me. “I’m doing all this for you, darling. We need to make sure your future in-laws know you’re a good man.”

A small shiver of revulsion passes over me. The fact they all think Jen and I are going to be married still makes me sick to my stomach. But we only have to continue this ruse for a few more months; then it’ll be over for all of

us.

Jen, Liam, and I will be on the other side of the country. Jen will be free to date whoever she wants, Kathryn and I will be together and Liam, well... Liam will be Liam.

“You look perfect in your suit, darling.” Mom adjusts my tie before dusting her hands over my shoulders. She smiles proudly. “You and Jen will make beautiful babies.” *Gross.*

“Thanks,” I say, my own voice cracking as I tug at the collar around my neck.

“Not yet though. But, it would be best if you both started trying in your final year of college. A young father is good optics for the American public.”

Yeah, screw the fact that Jen and I aren't in love with each other. “Jennifer and I will have a discussion about that.” And we'll laugh at the ridiculousness of it.

“Good. I'd like to be a grandmother sooner than later.”

“No pressure,” I say sarcastically as I take the first step up the staircase.

“Not yet, obviously.”

“Um.” I point upstairs. “I need to go and...” I stare at Mom, not sure what to say. “I've got stuff to do before people begin arriving.”

Mom clearly senses my discomfort and gives me a small nod. “Of course.”

I take off upstairs to my room. I close the door and lean against it as I shake my head, attempting to forget the whole baby conversation Mom forced on me. I head over and sit on the side of my bed. I close my eyes as I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Ugh,” I grumble at myself, frustrated with this entire impossible situation.

This is a clusterfuck of bullshit, but all we have to do is keep up with appearances until I “break” Jen's heart by being a cheating boyfriend. I know I'll cop some backlash from Jen's parents and probably have an enemy in the party for the rest of my life. I can live with that if Jen is able to live her life without having to be married to a man she doesn't love and become a human incubator.

I stay in my room for what feels like hours before there's a knock. “Yeah.”

The door slowly opens and Mom pops her head in. “Guests are arriving. You should come downstairs.” I stand and run my hands over my suit pants before adjusting my cufflinks and buttoning my suit jacket. Mom waits and

as I advance toward her, she crooks her elbow so I can take it and lead her downstairs. “You’ll make a fine husband, Bennett. And an even better politician with the right connections.”

I plaster a fake smile on my face and give Mom a small nod as we descend the staircase. “Thank you.”

“Caleb, Sophia and Jennifer should be arriving soon.”

“Great.”

Dad is already waiting for us in the foyer, and I hand Mom off to him as I stand behind my parents. This is all fake bullshit, but it’s what has to be done.

“Bennett,” Senator Samuel says as he approaches.

“Mr. Samuel, how are you?” I extend my arm for a handshake. The senator is short, fat, and has a receding hairline. His wife is taller than he is, so she often wears flat shoes so as not to accentuate the height difference.

“Good, my boy. How are you?”

“Very well, thank you.”

“When you want to work for a real politician, I have a spot open for you.” He releases a hearty laugh before looking over at Dad.

“Bennett here has a bright future in politics,” Dad replies as he claps a hand to my shoulder. “As long as he keeps his nose clean, I’m sure I can mold him into the perfect candidate.” I hate how Dad’s talking about me like I’m a lump of clay, not even a person.

“How do you feel about Bennett going to Yale?” Senator Lyons asks my parents, pushing into the conversation.

“It’s no secret that Yale’s a family tradition. I’d be disappointed if he wasn’t accepted,” Dad says. The three of them chuckle but what none of them know is I’m busting my ass to get to Stanford.

“The Marshalls are here,” Mom whispers.

I step forward and shift on the spot as I wait for my fake future wife and her parents to come to the door. The bell rings, and Dad opens the door. The other senators have now drifted away, leaving just us in the foyer.

Mr. and Mrs. Marshall waltz in, followed by Jen. “May I?” I ask as I step forward to take Jen’s thick winter coat.

“Thank you.” Jen allows me to assist her in shrugging out of her coat, and once I’ve handed the coat to the housekeeper, I link our fingers and lead her away from prying eyes, and big ears.

“Are you okay?” I ask in a hushed voice when I have her alone.

She shakes her head and lowers her chin. “I’m so grateful I have you.”

Jen leans against the wall and releases a caught breath. “This is horrible for everyone involved.”

“I know. Kathryn will be here soon with Liam, and she has to watch us together.” I gesture between us. “I hate that for her. But we all know this is only until we can move to LA.”

“She’s good people, Bennett.”

“So are you,” I say. Jen pushes off the wall and advances toward me, wrapping her arms around my middle. “Stolen moments and lots of secrets, that’s what we have to deal with. Are you sure you’re still okay with this?”

“You’re doing it for me, so yeah, I’m okay with our secret.” Jen pulls back and stands taller. “We need to get back out there and pretend we’re the happy couple.”

I run my hands down her arms, and give her a kiss on the forehead. “It’ll all be over soon.”

“I know.” Jen offers me a strained smile. We link fingers and head back out to join the party.

It doesn’t take long for the house to be full of donors and the other politicians my father is associated with. I look around for Liam and Kathryn, but I can’t see either of them. “Do you want a drink?”

“Sure,” Jen replies. I catch a server walking around and hand Jen a soda and grab one for myself.

“Aren’t you two an adorable couple?” Senator Samuel’s wife says.

Jen sidles into me and leans her head on my shoulder. “Thank you,” she says and offers a tight smile.

I drape my arm around Jen and bring her in closer to give her temple a kiss. “Thank you, ma’am,” I say.

“An Adams and a Marshall. That’ll make for a good political pairing,” the senator’s wife says with an arched brow.

In other words, she can see straight through this. Jen looks up to me and smiles with all her heart. If I was looking at us from across the room, I’d think we were madly, deeply in love. “The heart wants what the heart wants.”

The senator’s wife grins awkwardly, then turns to look at her husband who is speaking with one of the donors. “I think I heard my husband call.”

“Of course,” I reply. She hightails it out of here, and I look to Jen and roll my eyes.

“The political sharks are circling.”

“In all fairness,” I start. “This arrangement politically makes sense. Two

powerhouses combined to make the ultimate winning combination. That wasn't Senator Samuel's words, that was direct from his wife."

"Probably because she knows with the merging of our two surnames, you'd be unstoppable."

"*We'd* be unstoppable," I correct. I lean closer and lower so my lips are near her ear. "If you weren't gay, and if I was in love with you, then we'd be in the White House when I turned thirty-five."

Jen chuckles and pulls back. "You can still do that, but it won't be with me."

"No offense, but I don't want it to be with you."

She lifts her free hand in surrender and shakes her head. "None taken." Jen looks around the room and a large smile lights up her face. "Kathryn's here." She's genuinely happy for me to be with Kathryn.

I can't help but turn to look in the same direction, and when I see Kathryn, all the air leaves my body. "Wow," I whisper as I stare at the most beautiful person I've ever seen.

"Back up, Romeo," Jen says as she places her hand on my forearm to stop me from heading straight over to Kathryn. I look to Jen and crinkle my forehead. "Be careful," she warns. "Actually, let me come with you. We need to keep up with appearances."

My heart leaps into my throat because I know Jen's right. If Jen hadn't stopped me, I would've gone to Kathryn, wrapped her in my arms, and kissed her with everything I have. "You're right." I glance toward Kathryn, then back to Jen. Jen hooks her arm through mine and we head over to Liam and Kathryn who are now talking with my parents.

"Here they are," Mom says as she places her hand on my shoulder. "Liam and his girlfriend Kathryn are here."

My blood boils when Mom calls Kathryn Liam's girlfriend. Jen tightens her grip on me, forcing me back to the here and now. "I'm glad you could both come." I shake Liam's hand formally and step in to give Kathryn a kiss on the cheek. My lips touch her warmth and I close my eyes, staying in the moment far too long. Kathryn discreetly grazes her fingertips over my hips making my heart shudder with desire. "You look beautiful," I whisper, then pull back when I feel like the entire room is watching us. Of course, no one notices our tiny exchange.

"Thank you, Mrs. Adams for allowing me to accompany Liam to your Christmas party. Liam and Bennett have said that it's the party of all parties."

Mom stands taller with a proud smile. “I knew I liked you for a reason, Liam.”

Liam chuckles, as does Kathryn. But all I can see is Kathryn in her amazing dark-green dress that hugs her delicious body. She’s simply the most breathtaking woman who’s ever walked on this earth.

“Liam, would you like to dance?” Jen asks and reaches for his hand.

“Sure.” Liam takes Jen’s hand and they move away to where the band is playing in the back room.

“Kathryn?” I stand taller and offer her my elbow.

“I’d love to dance.” Kathryn links her arm through mine and we too head toward the ballroom. I take her in my arms and fight with my head to not draw Kathryn closer to me. “Your house is massive.” She looks around before her eyes land on mine. “You have to stop looking at me the way you are.”

“I can’t help it. All I want to do is claim you in front of everyone.”

“That’s not the plan, Bennett.”

“I know,” I admit with disappointment. “I wish things were different and I could let everyone know you’re mine.”

She arches a brow and tilts her head to the side. “I’m my own person.” I twirl her around and bring her in closer, but Kathryn fights me on it and maintains the distance between us. “Stop trying to pull me into you. People will talk.”

She’s right, and I hate that. My jaw clenches as I make sure there’s a safe distance between us. “I just want to hold you.”

“Well, you can’t. Not yet.” Kathryn glances around the room, smiles at someone and gives them a small nod. “Your mom is staring at us.” I look to Mom, whose eyes are locked on us. “This house is beautiful.”

“I guess so.”

“Guess so? You have a mini ballroom in your house.”

“Dad’s idea, because he says that we need to be able to host dinners and parties. Like this one.”

“You don’t seem particularly interested.”

“It’s always the same shit over and over again. Who has more money, who can be a bigger donor.”

“You really need to think about these things, Bennett. One day it’ll be you, and when it is, then this is what you’ll have to do.”

“What we’ll have to do,” I correct. “You’re in my future, Kathryn. I can

see it. You and me all the way.”

“All the way?”

“Yeah, all the way to the White House.”

“Should I start calling you POTUS? Or do you prefer Mr. President?” Her cute laugh makes me smile.

“Mr. President sounds good to me. Maybe even Sir.”

Kathryn chuckles again and shakes her head. “Boys,” she grumbles. “How about I call you Bennett unless you’re being a jerk, then your name will be Jackass?”

A loud booming laugh escapes me. “You’re not going to let me get away with anything, are you?”

She smiles up at me and shakes her head. “No chance in hell.”

There’s a tap on my shoulder, and I turn to see Jen smiling. “May I cut in?”

Hesitantly, I release Kathryn from my grip and step backward. “Of course.” Thankfully, Liam is there to keep dancing with Kathryn while I dance with Jen. It’s so difficult for me to see them close together.

“You need to look at me like you look at her,” Jen says with a smile.

“What?” I return my attention to Jen.

“While you two were dancing, I heard Senator Samuel’s wife say it looks like there’s trouble in paradise while she was staring at you and Kathryn.”

“I’m sorry,” I apologize to Jen. “I’m trying to control my reactions and feelings toward Kathryn, but—”

“I know,” she cuts me off. “You’re so in love with her. I understand, Bennett, and I have to say.” She gulps as her eyes redden. “I’m sorry you have to be in this position. I hate it as much as you do, but at least I’m not in love with someone else. You have no idea how guilty I feel.”

I bring Jen in closer, and wrap my arms around her, cradling her close to my chest. “This has to be so difficult for you.”

“It’s torture.” Jen’s arms snake around my middle as she hugs me.

I hate having to betray everyone because Jen’s and my parents are so stifling. I kiss the side of her head and snuggle her even closer as we move slowly to the music. “It’ll all work out in the long run.”

I look to Kathryn who’s in Liam’s arms and sigh.

I hope it works out.

KATHRYN

Spring break couldn't come quick enough. College has been kicking my ass, and to top it off, I miss Bennett. The worst part is I'm not going to be able to see him until we can both get on top of all our work.

Bennett is working tirelessly so he can transfer here, and I now have a job at the local supermarket so I can help with my living expenses. There's no way Bennett and I will be able to spend any time together in spring break.

But the end justifies the path to get there.

Lying back on the bed, I stare up at the ceiling while my mind constantly turns to thoughts of Bennett and I finally being able to be together.

A scrunched piece of paper flies over and hits me on the cheek. I turn to look at Faith who's sitting cross-legged on the bed in her pajamas. She waggles her brows at me and smiles. "What?" I say as I turn on my side.

"You didn't hear a thing I was saying, did you?" I avert my eyes as I hold in my smile. "There's a party over at—"

"No thanks," I say cutting her off.

"You haven't gone to one party since we've been here."

"I'm not really into partying."

"Ugh, you're such a boring hillbilly."

"A hillbilly?" I say with humor. "Boring, yes, but a hillbilly? No."

"Come on," she whines as she lolls her head backward. "Just one party. And I promise I'll never bug you again."

I scrunch my nose at the thought of going to a party with Faith. "I have to start getting ready to head in to work."

"You're working today?" Faith stares at me with an open mouth. "Blow off work and come with me."

I sit up in bed and cross my legs, mimicking Faith. “I’m not the partying type. You know that.”

Faith throws her pillow, which I easily dodge. “You’re no fun.” She pushes up off the bed and comes over to my side to retrieve her pillow. “One day, girl, I’m going to drug and blindfold you and drag you to a party kicking and screaming.” She smiles triumphantly.

I tilt my head to the side as I purse my lips together. “There’s a lot going on in that sentence that just doesn’t make sense.”

Faith flicks her hand at me before opening her drawers and rifling around to find what she wants to wear. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah. You’re a nutcase who’s hellbent on me going to a party even though you know parties aren’t my scene.”

“I know, I know, but you can’t blame a girl for trying. I think you’d have a great time.”

I shrug as I stare at Faith getting her stuff ready. “Maybe, or maybe not.” I stand and stretch my arms up over my head. “I’ve got to get ready for work.”

I grab my uniform and head out of the room and down the hall to the bathroom so I can change.

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Michelle taps me on the shoulder and I turn to look at her. “These customers can fuck off,” she whispers to me.

“It’s not that bad today.”

“I just had a jerk tell me he wanted me to wait while he picked his grapes off the stem because he didn’t want to pay for something he wasn’t going to eat.”

I glance around to make sure there are no customers offloading their carts onto the conveyor belt. “What did you say to him?”

“The same thing I said when he wanted me to peel his bananas for the same reason. I told him that if he does that, I’m going to weigh all the shit he discards and make him pay for it.”

A customer begins stacking groceries on the belt, and I turn back to scan

and bag them. “I can’t believe people do that,” I say to Michelle in a low voice while the customer continues to empty the cart.

“Extreme cheapskate, eat your heart out. I bet he has a multi-million dollar house with all the latest gadgets.”

“Can you imagine how much he’s saved over his lifetime by picking each grape off the stem? Maybe ten dollars?” I ask.

“If that.”

My customer glares at me, unimpressed with Michelle and I talking. “Did you find everything okay today?” I ask and offer him a large smile.

“Yes,” he curtly replies.

“Great.”

He glares at me, making it super uncomfortable, so I scan through his items as fast as I can to get rid of him. The entire few moments he’s at the register, he continues to huff while repacking what I’ve already done. “It’s not that hard to pack the damned bags properly,” he snaps at me.

“I’m sorry.” I can feel my mood deteriorating because of this assclown.

“You’re such an idiot. It doesn’t take a degree to figure these things out.” I remain quiet as I scan through his items and place them to the side so he can bag them the way he wants. “Pffft,” he scoffs.

“What am I doing wrong now?” I stop scanning to ask.

“You’re not even packing them.” He scans his eyes over my body and shakes his head. “No wonder you can’t get a job anywhere else.”

“Hey, you don’t speak to her like that.”

My arms erupt into goose bumps as a smile stretches my face. His voice is so distinct I could pick it in a crowd of other people. Bennett’s deep tone slides over my skin like the warmth of a fireplace on a cold winter’s evening. I turn to face him and can’t help but fly into his arms. “I’ve missed you so much,” I say.

“Excuse me, this isn’t acceptable,” the grumpy customer barks.

“Give me a minute,” I say to Bennett.

“What time do you finish?”

“About two hours.”

“Can you stop ignoring your customers before I put a complaint in against you?”

“Ease up,” the customer behind him says. “You’ve been a crabby old bastard from the moment you put your things on the conveyor belt. Give the poor girl a chance.” The woman is middle-aged, with a copious mane of salt-

and-pepper hair and dark eyes. She's a little heavy, and looks like she's had enough with life and now no longer cares what she says or who she says it to. The man I'm serving looks at the lady, and grumbles something unintelligible. "Keep going, old man."

I try my hardest to hide the smirk, but my face defies me. "I'll be back when you've finished," Bennett says once everything is calm. The old guy sneers toward Bennett, but a quick look over his shoulder at the woman behind him shuts him up when she arches a brow and purses her lips together.

"I can't wait." I smile broadly at Bennett but keep working. The customer I'm dealing with silently loads his bags in the cart and leaves. "Thank you," I say to the middle-aged woman.

"Darlin', you shouldn't have to put up with pricks like that old snot."

A loud giggle escapes me. "You'd be surprised what people think they're entitled to."

"Trust me when I say I know people can be assholes."

Thankfully, the rest of my shift goes by without a hitch.

—*—

The dorm door flings open and Faith dances into the room. "Guess who got laid?" she sings happily.

Thankfully, Bennett and I are both dressed and snuggling under the bedclothes. "I'm glad you didn't waltz in half an hour ago."

Faith lets out a small yelp when she sees Bennett, then smiles broadly as she plonks on my bed. "Well, well, well. Who are you?" Faith's eyes widen when she looks to me and smirks.

"Hi, I'm Bennett." He pushes the covers off us and extends his hand to shake hers.

"Ewww, no. I don't know where that hand has been." Faith waggles her finger at him. "So, who are you, and where did you come from? I thought you were meant to be working, missy."

"I did work, and I had no idea Bennett was coming."

"I bet you both came." Simultaneously, Bennett chuckles and Faith winks at me. "So, tell me about yourself, Bennett."

I turn to Bennett and whisper, "Sorry."

"What would you like to know?"

"How long have you two been together? Because, missy over here has never told me she's dating anyone."

"It's a complicated situation," Bennett says. He looks to me and I shake my head discreetly.

"How so? Do tell, I love juicy gossip."

"It's a long-distance thing, and we weren't sure if it would work or not. As it turns out, it's working and soon you'll be seeing me more often."

My heart fills with happiness knowing that Bennett will be moving.

"How soon?" Faith asks.

"New school year."

"What?" I ask as I sit up in bed. "For real? You'll be here that soon?"

Bennett nods and smirks. "If I continue getting the grades I've been getting, then yep, we'll be moving here then."

"Who's we? Your entire family?" Faith asks.

A sharp pain stabs me in the stomach. *Shit*. "My best friend and his girlfriend." What a damn save.

"Wow, an entire tribe is moving."

"Actually, the next time I come out, I want to look at apartments that we can all share." Bennett stares at me, waiting for my reply.

"You want to move in with me?" I ask in a small voice.

"A two-bedroom apartment. A room for you and me, and a room for Liam and Jen?" He slowly lifts his shoulders, while a sheepish look passes over him. "What do you think?"

"I think," I pause as I worry my lip between my teeth. "I think I'd love that."

Oh my God! Bennett and I are going to move in together, and because it'll be the four of us, no one is going to know any different. Jen will be free to live her life the way she wants, and Bennett and I can be together out of the watchful eyes of his and Jen's parents.

I throw my arms around Bennett, so happy that this is all working out.

We only have to hang on for a little while longer and he'll be free.

What a damned relief.

BENNETT

I pace back and forth in front of Dad's office, waiting for him to get off the phone.

My stomach is churning and there's a lump of anxiety sitting at the base of my throat.

"Darling, what's wrong?" Mom asks when she descends the staircase. "You've been pacing outside your father's office for the last ten minutes. What is it?"

"I need to speak to Dad and you."

"Is everything okay? Are you and Jen alright?"

"Of course."

Mom looks around to make sure none of the help are nearby and she whispers, "She's not pregnant, is she?"

"What? No, of course not."

Mom releases a relieved breath as she lifts her hand to her chest. "Don't get me wrong, having a child while you're both young is a good political move, but not yet. Not until you're in your final years of college. You're just too young now."

I offer Mom nothing more than a tight smile. "Trust me, Jen isn't pregnant."

"I'm glad you're being safe, Bennett."

I walk away from her to conceal my smirk. *Kathryn* and I are definitely being safe. Mom and I hear Dad finish with his phone call, and I knock on the door. "Yeah," Dad says.

I open the door and wait for Mom to enter before I do. "Our son has something to tell us."

“What is it?” Dad sits back in his chair and crosses his arms in front of his chest.

“Before I start, I need you to know I’ve thought long and hard about this.”

Dad straightens, and the smile on Mom’s face fades. “What have you thought about?” Mom asks.

“I’ve decided that I’ll be moving to Stanford.”

“What?” Dad leaps to his feet and moves around the front of his desk, where he leans against it. “Yale is a family tradition.”

I’ve gone over this argument in my head a million different ways. “I know it is, but, I want more than Yale can offer.”

“Yale is an Ivy League school.”

“So is Stanford. But Stanford’s political science program ranks higher than Yale’s.”

Dad’s eyes narrow as he lifts his chin to stare at me.

But it’s Mom who asks the next question, “And what about Jen?”

“She’s moving with me. And so is Liam.”

“The three of you?” Dad’s brows lift as he straightens. “The three of you are moving to the other side of the country to go to Stanford? Just like that? With no discussion?”

“The three of us have discussed it. And I was accepted.” I pull the letter out of my back pocket and offer it to Dad. “We all were.”

Mom and Dad look to one another before Dad takes the acceptance letter. “And you’ve kept this from us for how long?” Mom asks.

“We made the decision pretty early on.”

“This.” Dad makes a circular movement indicating Jen, Liam, and myself. “Is this some kind of freaky love triangle?”

“Darling,” Mom gasps in shock.

“Are you asking me if the three of us are in a relationship together?” I’m not even sure how to respond to this.

“I’d like to think we’re pretty open-minded people, but I’m not sure I can accept that kind of relationship,” Dad says.

“Rest assured, Liam and I are nothing more than best friends. So, no, we’re not all in a relationship.”

“Good.” Dad shivers with revulsion.

I don’t like his reaction, because who’s he to judge how people want to love? But, that’s an argument for another time. Right now, I need to convince

him that Stanford is the right place for me. “Let’s put your feelings aside and focus on Stanford.”

“Yale is where you’re supposed to be. That’s where I went, where your grandfather attended, where your great-grandfather went.” Dad pushes off the desk and begins to make his way back to his chair, essentially ending the conversation.

My shoulders sink as I stare at him. Mom catches my reaction. “Why do you want to go to Stanford?” she asks.

I knew this was coming, and I’ve been racking my brain as to what to say that’ll make them see Stanford is the school for me. “Out of all the Ivy League political science programs, Stanford is sitting at number one and Yale is sixth down the list.”

“Absolutely not, Bennett. You’ll stay at Yale, end of discussion.”

Mom starts moving toward the door, but I refuse to leave. “No. It’s not the end of the discussion. I’ve been accepted to Stanford, and I’m going. If you let me finish, Stanford has the best political science program in the country. I want that program because I’ve been thinking about where I ultimately want to land.”

Dad hesitantly looks up at me. “Which is?”

“Stanford will get me where I want to go.”

“Which is?” he repeats.

“1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.”

Dad keeps a wary eye on me as he lifts his chin and arches a brow. “Is that why you’ve been holed up in your room working so hard on your grades, so you can move to Stanford?”

“Yes, I want this. I want it more than I’ve ever wanted anything before.” Besides, Kathryn is waiting for me.

“California is already a blue state, what good could you do there? It would be better to migrate down to Florida.”

“Because it’s a swing state?”

“Yeah. If you want to make a smart move, the smartest is to hit Florida.”

“The smart move is to get into Stanford, which I have, and to graduate summa cum laude. Which I know I can do.”

Dad’s jaw jumps and he flicks a look to Mom. “What do you think?”

Mom slowly lifts her shoulders. “I think Bennett can do anything he wants, especially with your support. But I also think he’s already set his mind to it, and so he’s going to do it regardless of what you think.”

I turn to face Mom and give her a small smile. “I want this, Dad.” But I want Kathryn by my side, not Jen. And I can’t do it considering my heart is already across the other side of the country with Kathryn. “If Yale is so important to you, then I guess I have no other option but to stay. But, it’s important to *me* to go to Stanford.”

Dad’s nostrils flare as he releases a frustrated breath. “Stanford’s that important that you’ll disregard family tradition?” He’s attempting to lay on the guilt trip.

“Family tradition is so important to you that giving me the best opportunity to win the White House is worth disregarding?” I throw his words back at him.

“Let’s not go that far. There have been more presidents who’ve graduated from Yale than Stanford.”

“But Stanford now has the best political science program. To me it’s a no-brainer, Dad. Stanford is the best, and that’s where I’ve been accepted.”

“Your great-grandfather will roll in his grave.” Dad’s slightly caving which gives me hope that he might actually allow me to move. “I don’t like this.” He reclines back in his chair and releases a massive, disappointed sigh. “But if this is what you want...”

“It is,” I say.

“During summer vacation you’re to return and work with me.”

“I’ve already reached out to the California governor, and he’s offered me a job.”

“You have?” Mom asks. Dad’s just as surprised as Mom is.

“I have.”

“It looks like you’ve already made your mind up,” Dad says.

“I’ve also located an apartment near the campus that has two bedrooms.”

“Two bedrooms?” Mom asks.

“For Liam and...” I nearly slip up and say Jen but quickly course correct. “Kathryn and Jen and me. It has two bathrooms so Liam and I can have one, and Jen and Kathryn can have the other. It’s close to our campus, it’s close to Kathryn’s job, and it’s convenient for me to get to the office.”

Dad clicks his tongue to the roof of his mouth as his hard eyes drill into me. I hold my own against him, because I know if he senses any weakness in my reasoning, he won’t let me go. He glances toward Mom, then back to me. “When do you leave?”

A sense of relief floods through my body because I know now everything

will work out as it's supposed to. I'll be with Kathryn, and our future will be ours to do what we want with. "I've put a deposit on the apartment as of July first."

"Wow, you're leaving before the fourth?" Mom asks. "But..." Her eyes widen as she blinks at me.

"Jen and I will leave the day after your party."

Dad reclines in his office chair and steeples his hands together. "What you're saying is you've already made the decision and you were going regardless of what we had to say." Dad's brows lift and his lips thin into a disapproving line.

"I think what our son is saying is that he's serious about his future, and we should both be supportive," Mom says and offers me a tight smile.

I look to Dad for his approval, but he gives me nothing more than a few blinks and a sharp intake of breath. "I'll reach out to the senator and have a word with him," Dad says as he sits forward and opens his laptop, essentially dismissing me.

"I appreciate you understanding," I reply as I push up out of the chair.

"Yes, well..." Dad grunts.

I guess this conversation is over.

For now.

Mom closes Dad's office door and hooks her arm through mine. "You blindsided us, son."

"I didn't want to, but the truth is, I want what's best for me and Jen." *In more ways than one.*

"I'm not thrilled you'll be all the way on the other side of the country, but if it's what you want."

"It is."

Mom's back stiffens as she offers me a tight-lipped smile. "Yale is important to your father. But if Stanford is where your heart lies, then so be it." She gently pats my hand and gazes softly at me before finally nodding and turning to head to the kitchen.

I feel like a prick for doing this, but there is no other way. I run up the stairs to call Kathryn.

KATHRYN

Bennett's arms wrap around me as I cook in our tiny kitchen. "Smells good," he says as he pushes his body into mine.

"I'm cooking, you need to stop." I turn in his arms and drape mine over his shoulders.

"I think you should turn it off and come to the bedroom with me."

"Jen and Liam will be home soon, and it's my turn to cook. Which means they'll be hungry, and I'm not going to feed them nothing because you're horny and want sex."

He nuzzles into my neck, placing small kisses under my ear. "I can make it quick," he whispers.

"No, I need to finish." He grabs my ass, then slides his hand down to coax my leg up. "You're a fiend." I try to push off of him, but he clamps his arms around me. I laugh and push again.

Bennett backs away and lifts his hands to place over his heart. "You wound me deeply," he says playfully.

"Do I?" I lean in to offer him a kiss. "What a shame," I reply sarcastically. "What will you do now?"

He laces his fingers into the back of my hair and keeps me close to him, kissing me until I'm nearly breathless. "I could change your mind," he mumbles against my lips.

I pull back and shake my head at him. "We've been living together for a month and all you want is sex." I smirk as I continue cooking the ground beef that'll go on top of the nachos. "Is that all you want me for?"

Bennett rounds to the other side of the counter, pulls out a stool, and sits. "Isn't that obvious?" he asks with his own level of mockery.

I pick up a piece of chopped lettuce and throw it at him. “You could help instead of watching.”

“It’s my turn to cook tomorrow and Saturday night.”

“By cooking you mean ordering out, right?” Bennett half shrugs as he continues staring at me. “What?” I keep chopping the vegetables, getting them ready for the salsa I’m making.

“I might look into getting cooking lessons.”

“Well.” My brows rise as a small smile stretches my lips. “That would be awesome if you did.”

“You’d like that?”

“I would.”

There’s a knock on the door and Bennett and I look at each other. “Why are they knocking? They have keys.” Bennett stands, walks over to the door, and opens it. I’m expecting to hear Liam or Jen’s voice, but instead I hear Bennett say, “Mom. What are you doing here?”

Shit. I drop the knife and run into the bedroom to clear away the photos Bennett and I have. I then duck into Jen and Liam’s room, and push the beds together. This is something we knew *could* happen, but hoped it never did. I take my phone out of my pocket and send Liam and Jen a message.

9-1-1 Bennett's mom is here.

Liam’s reply is instant.

Shit.

Jen also replies with the same choice words.

I scan myself in the mirror to make sure my lips don’t look like I’ve been kissing Bennett. I run my hands down my t-shirt before taking a calming breath and walking out to greet Mrs. Adams.

“Kathryn,” his mom says graciously.

“Mrs. Adams, it’s nice to see you again.”

There’s a fine line of sweat covering Bennett’s hair line as he stands before his mother. He tucks his hands into his armpits and shifts from foot to foot. He has to calm down or he’ll give it all away to his mom. “What are you doing here, Mom? Is everything okay?” Bennett looks to the door, as if he’s waiting for someone.

Double crap, is his father here too?

“I wanted to come see my son, and the apartment he’s living in. Where’s Jen, is she here?” His mom looks around our small apartment, then lands on the food I’m cooking.

“Jen will be home soon,” Bennett replies.

“Would you like to stay for dinner, Mrs. Adams?”

She walks into the kitchen and looks at the ground beef simmering in the pan. “What are you having?”

“I’m making my signature nachos. It’s my turn to cook.” I smile broadly at her, hoping she can’t sense how Bennett and I feel about one another.

“Thank you. Are you sure you’ve made enough to include me?”

“Positive. I usually have left overs which Bennett and Liam clean up the next day.”

She shrugs out of her thin cardigan and hands it to Bennett. “Then I’d love to stay. Thank you.”

“Would you like a drink, Mom?”

“What’s on offer?”

“Just soda or water.”

“Water is fine, thank you.” His mom is a picture of perfection. She speaks with eloquence and carries herself with an air of authority. I’ve never really noticed how articulate or pristine she actually is.

“I think Liam and Jen will be home soon,” I say as I continue adding the ingredients to the salsa. Sure enough, not even a few heartbeats pass before the front door opens. “There they are.”

Liam strolls in first, makes a beeline to me, and plants a kiss on my lips. Bennett turns in his chair and grinds his jaw. “Hey, Mrs. Adams, what are you doing here?” Liam says playing the part of my doting boyfriend. He walks over to Bennett’s mom and places a kiss on her cheek.

“It’s always good to see you, Liam. Are you looking after my boy?”

“Mom,” Bennett grumbles.

“I’ll always look after Bennett. You know that.” Liam turns to me and peers over the counter. “Are you seriously making nachos?”

“I am.”

Liam pretends to wipe the saliva from his mouth. “Are you staying for dinner?” Liam asks Mrs. Adams. “Wait, where’s Mr. Adams?” I’m wondering the same thing.

“He’s back home. And, I’m certainly staying, if that’s okay with everyone?”

“Aha.” I nod. We’re all going to have to be conscious not to do anything that might give us away.

“Hi!” Jen announces as she comes through the front door. Bennett leaps to his feet and heads over to Jen. He wraps her in his arms before giving her a kiss on the mouth. I hate seeing them together, even if it’s all for show. I wish we could tell Jen’s and Bennett’s parents the truth, but we can’t. Not yet. And it’s killing me that we have to sneak around. Especially considering Bennett isn’t a convincing liar. That’ll be his downfall in politics. The fact he exhibits telltale signs of deception. For instance, like now. Although his arm is around Jen’s waist, he keeps looking to me, making sure I’m okay with this show we need to put on. “How are you, Mrs. Adams?” Jen asks and heads over to sit beside Bennett’s mom.

“I’m good. The flight was okay too.”

“When did you fly in?” Liam asks.

“I came straight from the airport.”

“Where are you staying?” Bennett asks.

Please, don’t ask to stay here. I’m not sure I can handle her being here for an extended period. It’s hard enough to pretend that Bennett and I aren’t together in the short time she’s been here.

“I have a reservation at one of the hotels nearby.”

Phew.

“How long are you here for, Mrs. Adams?”

“Only tonight and tomorrow. I fly back early the next day. So, what are you two doing tomorrow night?” Mrs. Adams looks to Bennett, then Jen.

“Why?” Bennett asks.

“I’d like to take the two of you out to dinner. I made a reservation at Starlight with the governor.”

“My boss?” Bennett asks. Fear passes over his face, but I don’t know why. No one knows he and Jen are a sham except for the four of us.

Jen reaches across and lays her hand over Bennett’s. “That would be lovely, thank you, Mrs. Adams.” Jen really fits into the political world. Especially when she speaks with the same confidence to Bennett’s mom.

“What do you think if we catch a movie tomorrow night?” Liam asks as he sidles up next to me and kisses my shoulder.

His touch is wrong, but I have to continue this ruse until we can be ourselves again. “Sounds great,” I reply with a tight voice and an even tighter smile.

“Can I help with anything, Kathryn?” Mrs. Adams asks.

“I’ve got it. You’re our guest,” Liam replies on my behalf.

The three of them stay seated at the snug dining table, while Liam and I pretend we’re the happy couple who cook together, though small knowing glances pass between us. Is it horrible of me to think that I can’t wait until she leaves so that I can have Bennett back to being all mine?

It’s okay, Kathryn, she’ll leave soon after dinner.

We all keep pretending, because that’s what we have to do.

— * —

I lay on the bed as Bennett dresses in one of his sexy suits. “I can pretend I’m sick,” he offers as he hesitates with his tie.

“You know you can’t,” I say as I sit up in bed and cross my legs while watching him. “Go, and have fun with Jen. But…” I lift my finger to point at him. “Not too much fun.”

He stops knotting his tie and walks over to the bed. I get up on my knees and Bennett embraces me tight to his body. “I hate how we have to sneak around.”

“So do I, but it’s what has to happen.”

“What if I tell Mom? She’ll understand.”

I love the idea of his parents knowing, but this isn’t my call. “I can’t tell you what to do, Bennett. You and Jen have to make that decision. Do you think your mom won’t tell your dad? That opens up a whole new can of worms. Because what happens if they then tell Jen’s parents?”

He tenses his arms around me and kisses the top of my head. “I hate this.”

“Me too,” I whisper as I squeeze him and close my eyes.

The knock on our bedroom door forces Bennett and I to pull apart. I look up to him, and he bends and seals his mouth over mine. “You’re my girl, Kathryn. You’ll always be my girl.”

“Hey, we need to leave now or we’re going to be late,” Jen says through the closed door.

“I’ll be there in a minute.” Bennett releases a deep sigh before kissing me once more, then pulls away to finish knotting his tie.

I get up and walk over to the door to open it. I walk down the hallway and find Jen dressed absolutely beautifully. She has her hair swept up into a perfect loose bun, and she's wearing a gorgeous dark-blue fitted dress. "Wow, you're smoking hot."

She looks down at her dress, then lifts her chin to meet my eyes. There's a certain amount of sadness that passes over her. "I'm so sorry, Kathryn," she whispers.

"Don't be." I feel like an ass in the moment. I hate how beautiful she is, and I especially hate that she's going on a date with my boyfriend to a fancy restaurant with the California governor. But it has to be even worse for Jen. She not only has to hide the fact that she and Bennett aren't dating, but that she's not the reformed gay her parents want her to be.

That's the part I hate the most.

"It should be you going, not me."

"We all have our part to play in this elaborate ruse. I guess the easiest part is we're all so far away from your and Bennett's parents."

She takes my hands in hers and lightly squeezes. "You have no idea how much I appreciate what you're all doing for me. I know this can't be easy." Her serious features soften as she smiles. "But rest assured, Bennett does nothing for me."

I can't help but grin. "I know, and that's what's getting me through."

"Are you ready?" Bennett asks as he walks down the hallway toward us.

I turn to look at him, and my breath catches as I carefully scan his delicious body. "Damn," I whisper, completely in love with how good he looks. "You..." I whistle and motion for him to do a twirl with my finger.

Bennett pulls his shoulders back, lifts his chin, puckers, and struts the remaining of the way. When he reaches Jen and I, he unbuttons his suit jacket and twirls on the spot. "It's the pucker that got me. That's it." Jen throws her arms up over her head. "I'm no longer gay." She turns to me and with a serious face says, "I'm sorry, that pucker has turned me un-gay and now I need to marry Bennett and have an entire football team of kids with him."

Bennett and I chuckle as he approaches me, slides his arm around my waist, and kisses my temple. "What am I to do? Two women fighting over me."

"Oh no, I'm not fighting." I look to her as I playfully back away. "Jen, you can have him."

"Hey," Bennett protests.

Jen looks to me, then Bennett. She worries her lower lip between her teeth and shakes her head. "On second thought, he's a bit too..." Jen screws up her nose and shakes her head. "Nah, you can have him."

"Oh no," I say, keeping the fun going. "I insist, he's all yours."

"No, thank you." She waves her hand.

Bennett walks over to the door, then turns to us. "I'm fake breaking up with you." He points to Jen. "And you." He then points to me.

"You're so sensitive," I say with a smirk.

The rush of happiness quickly eases when we're all faced with the reality that Bennett and Jen now have to leave and play happy couple. My heart hurts as I lock the door behind them.

With my shoulders down and a heaviness vibrating in my soul, I drag my sad body down toward our bedroom. I plonk on the bed and close my eyes.

The front door opens again, and a part of me is wishing they'd come back, but I know it'll be Liam. "Hey," he hollers down the hallway.

"In my room."

Liam appears and clicks his tongue loudly. He walks over and lies on the bed. "I know it sucks hairy donkey's balls, but we're doing it for a good reason."

"Hairy donkey's balls?" I move to my side and tuck my hands beneath my head. "What a vivid description."

"Wanna watch a movie?"

"Nah, not really. I want to stay in our room and wallow in self-pity." I hate feeling so damn powerless.

"Hairy donkey's balls," he repeats as he turns to face me. "You know, I've never seen Bennett so happy in his entire life. And I've known him since we were this big." He holds his hand out next to the bed, demonstrating they were still toddlers.

"He makes me happy too," I openly admit.

"You know there's nothing going on with Jen."

Now I feel like a shit person. "I do," I admit. "I just wish it was me, not Jen. I never thought this was going to be as hard as it is."

"He doesn't love her."

"I know." I look to him and sigh. "A part of me wishes we could fast-forward to when he and I are together, openly, in front of everyone and we don't have to hide anymore."

"There'll come a day when the three of us will be in the White House,

and this time of our lives will be pushed aside.”

A massive smile splits my face. “I think he’ll make a great president, and you’ll make a fantastic chief of staff.”

“Damn right I will.”

“Do me a favor though.”

Liam’s brows crinkle. “What is it?”

“If by chance I’m not in the White House with him, for whatever reason, look after him for me.”

“Why wouldn’t you be in the White House with us?”

“Because no one knows what the future holds. But promise me, no matter what happens between Bennett and me, that you’ll always look out for him. Protect him, and don’t let his stubbornness get in the way of anything.”

Liam chuckles and nods. “I promise, I’ll always look out for him. No matter what.”

I exhale a relieved breath and close my eyes. Although I hate that Bennett and Jen are out with his mom, at least I know Liam will always have Bennett’s back.

No matter what.

BENNETT

I feel sick to my stomach. I know it's not the flight, it's what I'm returning home to do. It's been nine months since we've been at Stanford, and our fake relationship has now run its course. Neither Jen nor I want to continue with this deception any longer. We made the decision last week to "end it" once and for all.

My heart is hammering inside my chest and my palms are sweating. I close my eyes and take deep breaths as the plane lands.

My parents don't know I'm on my way back, so this'll come as a surprise to both of them. I hope they understand. And I hope they don't demand I marry Jen, because I can't do it. I have different plans, and they involve my Kathryn.

It feels like time has sped up because before I know it, I'm in the rental and heading down the long driveway at home. Parking, I take a moment to regain my nerves before I make my way up to the front door.

"Okay," I whisper to myself as I gather my courage to enter.

I open the door to find one of the housekeepers vacuuming the foyer area. He stops and lifts his head to see me walk in. "Bennett, how are you?" Steven asks with a smile. "How's college?"

"I'm good and college is full-on busy. How are you?"

"I must admit, it's much quieter without you here. I clean your room every week, but it's never dirty enough for me to do much."

I chuckle, then look toward Dad's office. "That's gotta be a plus, right?" I point to Dad's door. "Are my parents home?"

"Mr. Adams is in his office, and Mrs. Adams is in the greenhouse."

"Thank you." I head toward the back where Mom is in the greenhouse

tending to her seedlings. “What are you growing?” I ask.

Mom startles but when she turns, her face erupts into a massive smile. “Darling, I didn’t know you were coming home. Wait, don’t you have exams?” She wraps her arms around my tall frame and gives me a tight *Mom* hug.

“They start on Monday.”

She steps back as her hands run up and down my arms. “Why are you here? Shouldn’t you be studying?”

“I’m only here until tomorrow morning, then I fly back.”

“I have you until tomorrow? Oh, damn it. What time is your flight?”

“Early. Too early, like eight in the morning.”

“At least I have you tonight.” She drapes her arm around my middle as we exit the greenhouse. “So, what are you doing here?”

The lump in my throat grows and my heart vibrates with the nervousness in my chest. “I have something I need to talk to you and Dad about.”

“Oh, no. I don’t like that tone.” She shakes her head. “Is everything okay? Jen? College?”

I slide the back door open and wait for Mom to enter before I follow and close the door. “Let’s go see Dad.”

“I feel sick, son. Is everything alright?”

“Mom, can we go see Dad?”

She stops and turns to carefully scan me. She searches my face, hoping for some kind of hint as to why I’m here. “I take it whatever it is, is big news that you couldn’t tell us over the phone.”

“It’s best I do this in person.”

Mom places her hand to her stomach. She gulps and gives me a tense nod. “Then, let’s see your father.”

We advance toward Dad’s office door. Mom opens it and enters. As usual, Dad’s on the phone, but the moment his eyes land on me he tells whoever he’s talking to that he’ll return their call. “Bennett,” Dad says happily and standing to his feet, he walks around the desk and gives me an awkward hug that leads into a handshake. “To what do we owe this impromptu visit?”

“He has something he wants to tell us, Titus.”

“Yes? What is that?” Dad leans against the desk and crosses his arms in front of his chest. “If you want to return to Yale, then say no more. I’ll call the college and get your transfer started.”

“Ah, no, I’m not returning to Yale.”

“Then what...” Dad looks to Mom. “Is she pregnant?” his voice lowers in disappointment. “This is the wrong time for Jennifer to be pregnant.”

“Actually, Jennifer is the reason why I’m here.”

Mom gasps and lifts both her hands to cover her mouth. Her eyes are wide, and her cheeks are plump with happiness. *Yeah, about that...* “Am I going to be a grandmother?” Funny how their responses are so different.

“Um. No.” I swallow the anxiety pulsating at the base of my throat. “Jennifer and I have decided to break up.”

“What?” Dad shrieks and stands tall. “No. Jennifer comes from impeccable breeding, Bennett. If you want a shot at the White House, you need to make sure everything is lined up. And Jennifer Marshall is the perfect woman to have beside you for that.”

“We’ve already broken up.”

“I’m sorry, but you have to undo this,” Dad argues as he rounds his desk and sits with force in his chair. “You know what you have to do, and you have to do it starting yesterday. Politics can be tricky and—”

“I know, Dad. Politics is all about perception, but everyone will be able to see that we don’t love each other.”

“Is there anyone else? Is she cheating on you?” Dad asks.

I look to Mom who’s quietly watching. I return my attention to Dad and shake my head. “No, she’s not cheating on me.”

“Then why did this happen? This is part of your life plan, and hers. What will Jennifer do now?”

“Well, here’s the thing. We figured out we’re quite good friends, so she’ll stay living with us, but she’ll sleep on the sofa.”

Dad’s brows knit together creating a deep V crevice. “How ridiculous, living with your ex-girlfriend. Do you have any idea how this will go down once her parents find out? They’ll want her to move back here, and they’re going to hate you. You won’t have her father’s support.”

“Neither of us have done anything wrong, so why would he hate me? Besides, we’re still friends, it’s just that we couldn’t be more than that. At first it was okay, but as the months went by it was more like we were roommates than in a relationship.”

“What a damn mess, Bennett.” Dad glances over to Mom and asks, “What do you think, Lydia? You haven’t said a word.”

Mom’s shoulders sink as she glances down at her hands. It takes a few

seconds, but she lifts her head and looks at me, then Dad and says, “They don’t love each other.”

“Who cares? This is about political alignment, and both their futures.”

“Jennifer can still have an amazing future without marrying me,” I say.

“Jennifer’s future is—”

“Darling,” Mom cuts Dad off and silences him with nothing more than a stare. “They’re kids who don’t love one another. They tried and it didn’t work.”

“But—”

“There really isn’t a *but*.” Mom looks to me. “I take it you’ve already broken up?” I nod. “And she’s on the sofa?” Again, I nod. “And how is Jennifer?”

I pause for a second and lick my lips before I answer, “Relieved.”

Mom smacks both her hands on her thighs and stands to her feet. “Then it seems it’s all done.”

“No. There has to be a way to make sure they get back together.”

“They don’t love one another, Titus. What do you expect them to do?” Mom points her finger at Dad. “It’s done. That’s it.” She turns to me and asks, “I take it Jennifer hasn’t told her parents?”

“Her exams already started, so she’s returning to tell them next weekend. I would appreciate it if you keep it to yourselves until she has the opportunity to tell them.”

Mom’s lips tighten as she nods. I glance to Dad, hoping he’ll keep this to himself. “Of course,” Dad says.

“Thank you.” I stand and move toward the door. I guess I owe them more than just a thank you. I turn to face my parents. “I’m sorry this didn’t work out with Jennifer. We tried, but it didn’t feel right.”

Dad arches a brow and looks to his computer. “While you’re here, we’ll go to the club for dinner tonight.” And just like that, the conversation is over. *I hope.*

— * —

I finish dressing for dinner when there’s a faint knocking at the door. I walk

over and open it to find Mom dressed and ready to go. “Everything okay, Mom?”

“Can I come in?” She gestures with a sweep of her hand.

“Of course.” I step aside for Mom to enter, and when she does, she sits on the bed and pats the spot beside her. “What is it?”

“I’ve been thinking about something.”

“You have?”

She clasps my hands in hers. “Do you remember when I came out and took you and Jennifer to dinner with the governor?”

How can I forget? You sprang a surprise visit on us, and we had to hustle to make sure you didn’t catch Kathryn and me. “I do.”

“I want to ask you a question, and I want honesty from you. Okay?” My forehead crinkles as I stare at her and nod. Where’s this going? “Are you and Kathryn together?”

“What?” Damn it, the crackle in my voice deceives me. “What do you mean?” I ask trying to even my voice.

“I noticed the way you looked at each other, but I pushed that aside when I took you and Jennifer to dinner. Although, now that I think about it, it makes sense. You and Kathryn had chemistry, you and Jennifer never did. So, I’ll ask again, are you and Kathryn together?”

Shit, this isn’t something I thought would happen. I can’t tell Mom about Jen because it’s not my secret to share. “The thing is—”

“Ah, I see,” Mom starts.

“Actually, you don’t.”

“How long have you and Jennifer been broken up?” I stare down at my feet as I release a small sigh. “Good Lord, tell me you weren’t cheating on Jennifer with Kathryn?”

Although this isn’t something any of us have discussed, I feel like I owe Mom some kind of explanation. “The thing is,” I repeat and Mom groans. “Jennifer and I tried, but it wasn’t working for either of us a long time ago. And I’m telling the truth when I say she and I are good friends.”

“What about Kathryn? I saw it, son. I saw the way you looked at her, and the way she looked at you. She and Liam were never together, were they?”

“No, they weren’t,” I admit. “Mom, I know this is going to sound crazy, but I love Kathryn with my entire heart. I can’t imagine myself ever being with anyone else.”

Mom’s brows rise as she stares at me. “I take it this relationship has been

going on for longer than you've admitted to." My jaw flexes as I hold in the lie. She pats my hand and chuckles. "The heart wants what the heart wants, darling. But I'm not telling your father. You'll have to do that."

"Kathryn and I were planning on coming back after exams are done and letting you both know. I'd appreciate it if you kept this to yourself. I'm sorry I'm asking you to lie to Dad."

"I could see it then. You and Kathryn are meant to be together. You and Jennifer..." She shakes her head. "You didn't move around her the way you do with Kathryn." Mom cups my face and gently runs her thumb across my jaw. "You can't help who you fall in love with. But I do have a question."

"Which is?"

"Can you see her in the White House with you?"

"She's the only one I can see in my future. Of course, Liam's already claimed chief of staff."

"Obviously he knows?" I nod. Mom chuckles and intakes a sharp breath. "Then he deserves chief of staff, especially considering he's protected you, Kathryn, and Jennifer. He's earned that position." She stands and walks toward the door. "You already have something many politicians don't."

"Which is?"

"Loyalty and commitment." She gulps and parts her lips. "I won't say anything to your father, but don't leave it too long either." She opens the door, then turns around. "As long as you're happy, son."

"I am."

"Good. Then for now, this is our secret."

I close my eyes and bury my face in my hands once Mom is gone. She knew all along but never said anything. In my heart I know this is the right thing to do. I just hope Dad accepts this as easily as Mom. Maybe when he sees Kathryn and me together, he'll be okay.

I can only hope.

BENNETT

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I ask Kathryn as we drive toward my house.

“Your mom knows about us. I just hope your father handles it well.”

“He will.” I splay my hand on her thigh and give it a gentle reassuring squeeze. Kathryn looks out the window, but she’s wringing her hands together. “It’ll be okay.”

“I know,” her voice deceives her. She’s nervous and unsure. “Maybe we can just head back to our apartment and let them know via a phone call, or better still, an email.”

I chuckle and shake my head. “Too late, because we’re here.” I pull into the driveway and turn the car off. “This is nothing. We can get through this.”

“Uh-huh.” She nibbles on her lower lip and looks up at the house. “Or, you could start the car, back out of the driveway and we can go back to Cali.”

“No.” I snicker at her nervousness. “We need to face this.”

“Ugh,” Kathryn scoffs and rolls her head back. “Can’t we just pretend we didn’t make it and leave?”

“Nope.” I open my door, exit the car, and walk around to her side. When I try the handle, she’s locked it. “Open up.” She shakes her head through the glass and smiles. “Let’s go.”

“I can’t hear you,” she says.

“Open the damn door, Kathryn.”

“The handle is broken. I can’t. But I still can’t hear you.”

I take the fob out of my pocket and press it once to lock the car, then again to unlock it. She locks it before I have a chance to open the door. *Cheeky*. I do it again, but this time I’m successful in flinging the door open.

“Seeing as the handle was broken, I thought I’d help.” I hold my hand out to her.

“I think I have a contagious disease and I shouldn’t give it to your parents.” She fake coughs into her elbow. “See, really sick.” I push my hand in further, waiting for her to take it. “Damn it, my seat belt won’t come undone. Too bad, we’ll just have to leave.” She reclines in the seat and lifts her shoulders. “Oh well.”

“Get out of the damn car, Kathryn,” I say in a dark tone while holding my hand out to her.

Kathryn grumbles, clicks the release of the seat belt, and half-heartedly slides out of the car. “Happy?” she snaps.

“Very. Now, let’s go tell my father.”

Kathryn looks up at the house and takes a faltering step backward. “Are you sure?”

I push my hand into hers, linking our fingers together. “Let’s go.” I damned near have to tug her up to the front door because she’s dragging her feet. She loops her arm through mine and holds onto me with a death grip. I knock and wait.

Mom opens the door and instantly drags me in for a hug. “Bennett,” she nearly squeals in her excitement to see me.

“Hey, Mom,” I manage to say beyond the hard choke hold.

Mom pulls back and looks to Kathryn. She steps forward and drags Kathryn into a massive hug. “Thank you,” she whispers to Kathryn.

“What for?” Kathryn asks when they break apart.

“Because you make my son happy.”

Kathryn beams with bliss. Her shoulders relax and she glows from Mom’s one compliment. “It’s easy to do when he does the same thing for me.”

Mom kisses me on the cheek and holds her hand out for me to take. “Well, let’s get this over with.”

“You haven’t told Dad?” I ask as we hover in the foyer.

“Oh no, darling, that’s up to you to do. I made myself clear when you were last here.”

I look to Kathryn who’s again become an emotional mess. “You ready?”

“I can wait in the car.”

Mom chuckles and shakes her head. “If you two want this, then you best get in there.” Mom knocks on Dad’s office door and steps back.

“Thanks, Mom,” I say through gritted teeth.

“Rip the Band-Aid off.” She smiles broadly when Dad calls for us to enter.

I take a sharp breath, lift my chin, and reach for Kathryn’s hand. I open the door and with Kathryn, walk into Dad’s office. With laser focus, Dad sees us holding hands. His jaw jumps and he arches a brow. Dad clicks his tongue to the roof of his mouth. “Well,” he says.

“Hi, Dad,” I start.

“I thought only you were coming home.”

I glance over at Kathryn who’s staring at the ground, worrying her lip between her teeth. “So, I came home because there’s something I wanted to share with you and Mom.” Mom waltzes in and sits opposite Dad. “I’d like to formally introduce you to Kathryn, my girlfriend.”

“Weren’t you here two weeks ago telling me you split up with Jennifer?” Dad’s voice elevates as he flicks a cautious, hard glare toward Kathryn, then back to me.

“It didn’t work out with Jennifer.” Kathryn squeezes my hand, silently telling me not to go into the why.

“Why not? Jennifer comes from an impeccable lineage, and she would’ve been a good fit for you.” Kathryn squeezes my hand again. This time, I have a feeling she’s hurt by Dad’s fierce words.

“No, Dad, she wouldn’t have been. Because although we tried, we both knew it wasn’t going to work.”

“So what?” Dad flicks his hand up to gesture toward Kathryn. “Were you screwing her while you were dating Jennifer?”

A small whimper escapes Kathryn. “Don’t speak like that,” I say and step in front of Kathryn, shielding her from Dad’s angry eyes and spiteful mouth. “It wasn’t like that, Dad.”

“She’s not going to get you to the White House like you want. She doesn’t come from a political family, and she has no idea how to play the perfect wife.”

“You’ll watch your tone when you’re speaking about Kathryn,” I warn.

“Is she the reason you wanted to go to Stanford? Did Liam and Jennifer even have a choice?”

I open my mouth to argue with Dad, but Kathryn places her warm hand to my chest as she steps in front of me. “Bennett will make the White House, and not because of the person standing beside him, but because he has the

drive and he's a kind and compassionate man." She lifts her chin as her lips tighten. "Unlike yourself."

Dad's eyes widen and his head tilts to the side. "You come into my house and disrespect me?"

"You're doing a good job of disrespecting me," Kathryn returns his argument. "I'm treating you the way you're treating me."

Dad glances between all of us, and finally settles his steely eyes on mine. "You're going to allow your *girlfriend* to speak to me like that?" he spits the word with revulsion.

"*Let me?* I might not come from a political background, but I know what's right and wrong. You're angry that your son isn't following the plan you've set out for him."

Dad stands and places both his palms on the desk. He leans his body forward and says with a bitter tone, "He'll never reach his potential with you." He looks her up and down and adds, "You're not First Lady material. You're not good enough for my son to make president."

"Hey," I snap toward Dad.

Kathryn pulls me back and stands with her head high. She releases my hand and steps even closer to my father. "The saddest part of this is you're acting like a politician. An old white man who doesn't have a clue how real people live or what they think. You don't even care that I make Bennett happy. Instead, your dislike of me reflects only an obstacle to your political agenda." She scoffs at him and shakes her head. "What a shame, because Bennett is brilliant and fun, and caring and loving, and he does what he promises he'll do. Pity you can't see that in him, and you think he needs a wife who's been told her entire life that she needs to play a part." Kathryn sneers at Dad, and I couldn't be any prouder of her. "He's amazing and you don't think he's enough."

"I..." Dad closes his mouth and looks between Mom, myself, and Kathryn. "That's not what I was saying."

"Darling," Mom starts. "Perhaps you and Kathryn should both head out. The garden is lovely. Pass by the kitchen and ask the chef to prepare a cheese platter."

"Mom, I—"

Mom ushers Kathryn and me toward the door. "Your father and I need to have a conversation."

"But—" Mom lifts her hand to stop me from talking.

“Your father and I will be out soon.” She nearly pushes us out the door and closes it behind her.

“I’m sorry,” Kathryn says.

“Don’t be. You were amazing.”

“I just couldn’t let him speak to you like that.”

I wrap her in my arms and kiss her temple. “He shouldn’t have said what he did. And I’m not making excuses for him, but he’s an intense man.”

She pulls back and shakes her head. Her big, brown eyes are staring at me. “I don’t care how intense he is, what he said wasn’t called for. I was standing right there while he was attacking us both.” She gulps and takes a step back. “How dare he insinuate that you can’t get to the White House on your own.”

“He’s not wrong though, Kathryn.” I reach for her hand and start toward the back garden. “There’s only ever been one president who was single when elected. The American people feel safer knowing the president is married and to top it off, only four didn’t have families.”

“I’m hearing that it’s not impossible to be elected without a wife and without a family.”

I can’t help but laugh. “Not impossible, just improbable.” I look behind me, worried about the discussion my parents are having.

“Hey,” Kathryn says and places her hand on my thigh. “Whatever happens, it’ll be okay.” She smirks and turns to look at the house. “Besides, your dad doesn’t scare me.”

“It was sexy seeing you take him on like that.”

“Sexy?” Kathryn barks a full belly laugh. “I didn’t like the way he was speaking about you. And, I wasn’t too keen on what he had to say about me either.” Although her words are comforting, I can’t help but worry about what’s happening. “Trust me, it’ll be fine.”

“I’m sure it will be,” I say as I place my hand over hers and lightly squeeze.

It doesn’t take long before my parents join us. Mom and Dad sit next to each other, and Dad looks to Kathryn. “My apologies for my behavior, Kathryn.”

“Apology accepted,” she replies instantly.

The tension is running high, but as the chef begins to set the table for lunch, the anxiousness eases slightly. There’s a lot of small talk around the table, nothing of substance. Dad can’t help but stare at Kathryn, then glance

toward me. “I have to say something,” Dad says.

Oh shit, here we go again.

“Titus?” Mom clears her throat and pins him with a silencing look.

Dad lifts his hand to alleviate Mom’s inaudible concerns. “I might not like this match, but I’m impressed at how you defended not only yourself but Bennett too.” Dad meets Kathryn’s eyes, waiting for a reply.

“He’s a good person who has morals. And I respect that about him.”

Dad accepts her reply with a mere nod. Silence enshrouds us as we all stiffly load our plates from the platters the chef has brought out. “Kathryn,” Dad starts. Kathryn’s posture becomes rigid. She looks to him and waits. “Do you love my son?”

“Dad,” I say.

“Yes,” Kathryn replies instantly. “I do.”

“Do you love Kathryn?” Dad looks to me.

“I do.”

“Do you see yourself in the White House with Kathryn?”

“I can’t see myself doing anything of importance without her.” A small smile tugs at the corner of Kathryn’s lips as she stares down at her plate. “She’s my reason why.”

Dad straightens and pulls his shoulders back. “You can clearly handle yourself, Kathryn,” Dad pauses then looks toward me. “And you look happy, son.”

“I am.” It’s like the weight of the world has lifted off my shoulders. I no longer have to pretend I’m in a fake relationship. “Kathryn brings me so much joy.”

Dad clicks his tongue to the roof of his mouth. I know he’s not a hundred percent in favor of our relationship, but in time, he’ll come around. He’ll learn to love Kathryn, and if he doesn’t, then that’s on him.

“I for one love seeing my son happy,” Mom says. “And as far as I’m concerned, if Kathryn is willing to stand up to you, then she’s the right person for Bennett.”

There’s a silent exchange between Kathryn and Mom, and that in itself makes me feel so much better.

I know Kathryn is my forever.

But for now, I’m relieved that this wasn’t as intense as I thought it was going to be.

That’s a step forward.

KATHRYN

“Thank you for coming with me,” I say to Bennett as we drive toward home.

“It’s the least I can do.”

“Mom’s not going to be happy.”

“She’ll understand,” he says and places his hand on my thigh. “You’re two years into a program you hate. You should be doing what you love.”

“I love you,” I say cheekily.

“You can do me any time you want,” he replies with humor. “Any time at all. I mean, you can pull over right now, and we can have a quickie here.”

“On the highway?” I glance over and shake my head.

“I’m sure there’s a dirt road further up if you’re feeling shy.”

“I’m not having sex with you on the side of the highway or on a dirt road.”

“We have to christen the rental before we return it.” He looks around and huffs. “Or not, it might be too small.”

“You need to get sex off the brain, Bennett, because we’ll be pulling into my driveway soon and I don’t want you with a hard-on.”

“If you don’t want me with a hard-on, you could always let me fuck your mouth.”

I damn near veer off the road with his abrasive honesty. “Can you wait until we return to our apartment?”

“Are you kidding me? No sex for today or tomorrow? We didn’t have sex yesterday either.” He pinches the bridge of his nose and huffs. “If this gets to be one of those we only have sex four times a week, then that’s it.” He dramatically throws his arms up. “I’m going to have an affair.”

With a gaping mouth, I turn to glare at him before returning my attention to the road. “If that cock of yours goes anywhere near another woman, I will personally chemically castrate you.”

Bennett scrunches up his nose and mouth. “You said cock and castrate in the same sentence. I’m now soft. *Thanks.*”

I snort with a chuckle. “Remember that, buddy. You want to be the first eunuch president? If not, that cock belongs to me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he grumbles with a tinge of humor.

“Oh shit,” I say when I realize we’re close to Mom’s. Bennett easily reads my mood and gently runs his hand up and down my thigh. It dawns on me that Bennett was distracting me. “Thank you,” I say.

“It’ll be fine.”

“I hope so. I know Mom wants the best for me, but I just can’t do another year.”

“Your mom knows I’ll be with you, right?”

“Uh-huh. She’s happy to see you again.” Mom really does like Bennett and has easily accepted him.

“Remember, we’re having dinner with my parents tomorrow too.”

“I know,” I say. It’s been just over twelve months since we told Bennett’s dad about us, and thankfully, he’s warmed up to me now. “You know,” I start. “I’m glad we did what we did.”

“Are you talking about last weekend? Because, I’m happy to do that again too.”

“Will you stop thinking about sex for a moment?”

“Damn it,” he mumbles.

“I’m talking about keeping Jen’s secret.” I swallow and intake a sharp breath. “I’m glad we did that for her. It’s just a shame her parents haven’t accepted Jen and have basically washed their hands of her. It really is sad that once she stood up for herself, her parents were so upset that they haven’t spoken to her since. But at least she’s happy now. She’s herself and doesn’t have to hide. Hopefully, she’ll find her person soon.”

“I don’t know what I’d do if one of our kids ended up being gay.”

Did he say what I think he did? *Our kids?* I take a moment to gather my thoughts before I say, “Yeah, you do.” I’m not going to freak out about the whole kids thing. Nope, I refuse to allow it to mess with me. “Look at what you did for someone you barely knew. Which means, you know you’d love your kid unconditionally, regardless of their sexuality or gender.”

“Huh.” He turns in his seat to stare at me. “And here I thought you were going to have a full-on panic attack because I said *our kids*.”

“I’m hiding it,” I admit. “It’s there, but I’m trying not to let it get to me.”

“What do you think about us having kids?”

“We’re too young to consider something so life altering.”

“I’ve been thinking about it.”

“I’m not ready for this, Bennett.”

“I know because I’m not ready for it either, but I do want kids. Later. *Much later*.”

“I want you in the White House first.”

“We both know that—”

“Politics is all about perception. I know, I know,” I say cutting off his sentence. “But, I’m not going to have a child because it’s what’ll get you elected. If you can’t be elected without a family, then you’re not a very good politician.”

“Hey.” Bennett lifts his hand to his chest. “That cut deep.”

“Too bad. It’s my truth, Bennett.” The car is blanketed in silence as I continue toward my mom’s. “Look,” I start so I can break the tension. “I’m not saying I don’t want kids. I’m just saying, let’s revisit this topic after college, and hopefully, if all goes well today, I’ll be working as a librarian.” I don’t even know what else to say. Kids aren’t my priority at this stage.

“I’d like to know we’re both on the same page though.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“Are kids a hard ‘no’?”

“I already said they aren’t. I’m just not having kids to fit a political agenda. Besides, I want us to be stable before we decide to try for a baby.”

“What about marriage?”

“What about it?” I ask.

“Is that something you want?” Bennett asks as he shifts in his seat.

“Long term, absolutely. Right now? Hell no.”

“What about a long engagement?” I shrug indifferently. “That’s not a hard ‘no’?”

“I don’t mind a long engagement, hell, I think I’d really love that. I just want us established and knowing where we’re going before we bring a child into this world. I want us financially secure too.” I glance toward him. “Do you think my request is unreasonable?”

“Not at all. It’s actually highly logical. You don’t want us to do anything

that'll set us backward.”

“I don't,” I admit. “You want the White House, and I want to help make that dream come true for you.”

“What do you think about that?” he asks a question we've discussed only a handful of times in the past.

“If you want it, then I want it for you.”

“It means our life will never be our own. We'll always be in front of the tabloids, news, and the rumors...” He whistles as he exhales. “It can ruin us.”

“Only if we let it, Bennett.” I turn into Mom's street and drive slowly until I pull into her driveway. “Well, here we go.” My heart is hammering inside my chest, and I feel sick to my stomach. Mom will be disappointed and upset that I want to leave college to become a librarian. But, it's what I want and I just hope she's okay with it.

The driver's door opening startles me. I wish this was over. “Are you ready?”

“Sure,” I say, my voice cracking. I take Bennett's extended hand and he helps me out of the car. As we walk toward the front door, I can hear the thumping of my heart in my ears. My pulse quickens and I feel like I'm going to vomit. “Alright,” I say, trying to pep myself into confidence. I knock once on the door and wait.

Mom flings the door open, and the moment we're inside, she has her arms wrapped around me. “Kathryn.” She peppers me with a ton of kisses. “I've missed my girl,” she says and squeezes me. Mom steps backward and scans her gaze down my body. “I hate how far away you are. You need to come back to me.” She abruptly turns to Bennett. “Come back!” she demands playfully.

“As soon as school is over,” Bennett says.

“How are you, Bennett?” She gives me another small hug before releasing me.

“Really well,” Bennett replies.

“So, come in. Are you hungry? Thirsty?”

“I could use a soda,” I say.

“Let's sit and we can talk.” Mom scurries ahead and Bennett and I follow. Our home isn't as extravagant as Bennett's parents' home, but it's certainly nice and comfortable. It's exactly what Mom needs. Bennett pulls a chair out for me in the dining room before he sits beside me and we wait for Mom to return. “Here we go. My own lemon iced tea.” Mom pours a glass out for

each of us. She takes a sip of hers, then places the glass on the table. “Let’s get down to business.”

“What are you talking about, Mom?” I ask, my nerves are completely shot.

“You’re here to tell me something.” She casts a suspicious eye over Bennett and me. “What is it? Are you pregnant?”

“God no!” I say with too much enthusiasm. “Nothing like that.”

“Then what?” Mom picks her glass up and takes a sip. “I know you’re doing extremely well at school, so it can’t be that.” My face falters as I avoid her eyes. “So, it’s school then.”

I look everywhere but at Mom as I intake a long breath. “I don’t want to finish the degree.”

“What?” Mom’s voice is unusually high. “What do you mean you don’t want to finish it? You’re two years in which means you only have—”

“It’s not for me. I’m good at it, but I hate it. I dread going to every class, I hate waking up knowing I have to go back there to do something I don’t want to do.”

Mom sits back in her seat as her shoulders relax. “How long have you felt like this?”

“Since you told me this was my career option.”

“What? Why on earth would you leave it so long?”

“Because I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

“Disappoint me?” Her hand flies up to her chest. “You could never do that, Kathryn. I thought you wanted it.”

“I only wanted it because you did.”

“This could’ve all been avoided if you just told me.” Now I feel like a complete idiot. “Why didn’t you tell me this earlier? Like two years ago?”

“It’s always been you and me, and you’ve worked so hard to give me everything I ever wanted. You saw I was good with numbers and it kind of went from there.” I look around to the backyard, avoiding my mother’s hurt gaze. “I feel like an idiot.”

“No, don’t do that to yourself.” Mom stands and walks around to where I’m sitting. She squats in front of me and takes my hands in hers. “I’m sorry, Kathryn. I should’ve paid more attention.”

“I was nervous about telling you. I thought you’d be angry or disappointed with me.”

“I’m neither. But what is it you want to do?”

“I want to be a librarian.”

“That’s a massive change from being a financial analyst.” Mom stands and heads over to where she was sitting. “What does that entail?”

“It’s a new course.”

“Where?”

“I can do it in Cali.” I give her all the details and by the time I’m finished, Mom is already nodding her approval. “What do you think?”

“I think, if you want to do it, then do it. It’s no use in sticking with something that’s making you miserable. I’m going to be honest with you.”

My stomach twists as I lift my hand to nibble on my nails. “What is it?”

“You’ve come so far with the course you’re doing. Why don’t you finish it, then once it’s done you can study to become a librarian? It doesn’t hurt to have a financial degree under your belt. You never know when or if you’ll need it.”

I look to Bennett who lifts his brows as if to say, *It’s up to you what you want to do*. “I don’t know, Mom. I’m not sure I can do another year of this. It’s taken everything I have to complete the two years I’ve already done.”

“Think about it. You have summer vacation to decide if you want to go back. All I’m saying is it would be a shame if you went two-thirds of the way to a degree only to leave in your last year. But, again, the choice is yours. I just don’t want you regretting this decision when you’re thirty or forty. You never know what’ll happen in your life.”

“I know,” I say. “Although this is all I’ve been thinking about, I’ll take another week and weigh up all my options.”

Mom smiles. “Whatever decision you make, I’ll support it. Whatever it is.” I feel like Mom wants to add something to it, but she doesn’t. “How’s work, Bennett? I’m surprised you were able to make it considering we’re so close to the election. I thought you would’ve been needed in Cali.”

“I negotiated for this weekend off so I could be with Kathryn.”

“You negotiated? I thought it would’ve been all hands on deck.”

Bennett reaches for his drink and nods. “Trust me, it is. But I wanted to be with my girl, so here I am.”

Mom took the news a lot better than I was expecting her to. I was filled with dread and agony knowing I was going to have to tell her the truth, but as it turns out I was being a complete idiot.

Lesson learned. Note to self: Don’t keep shit bottled up because you’re too afraid of the other person’s reaction. It’s probably never as bad as what

you think.

BENNETT

“What’s wrong, Bennett?” Kathryn asks as I drive.

“Nothing, why?” My hands are sweating and my heart has never beat so fast and loud in my entire life.

“We had dinner with your parents and you barely even spoke with them. What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” I snap.

“Hey, don’t be a jerk,” Kathryn pulls me up on my brisk response.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I’ve got a lot on my mind, that’s all.”

“Is it the election?”

No. “Yeah, there’s still so much to do before November, and I’m afraid I’m going to be traveling between college and work until this is over.”

“Well, this is what happens when you’re in politics.” Kathryn looks out the window and releases a cute little sigh. “Are you sure that’s it?”

“Yes, of course,” I say with too much force.

“If you say so.” With a dry mouth and a palpitating heart, I’m not sure how much longer I can hold onto this before I damn well break. “Where are we going?”

“Somewhere,” I reply curtly.

“What is wrong with you, Bennett?” She swivels in her seat and crosses her arms in front of her chest. “I don’t like this version of you. You’re being horrible to me, and I haven’t done anything to deserve this.”

“I’m so sorry, baby,” I say feeling like a complete dick. “I’m just stressed, and tired. That’s all. And tomorrow we fly back home, and I know the next few months are going to be insanely busy.”

“It’s what you signed up for. If you don’t want to do it, then pick a

different career path.”

Wow, talk about savage. “You’re right, I’m being unreasonably short with you. You haven’t done a single thing except be perfect and I’m treating you like an ass. I’m sorry,” I say as I try to soften my voice.

“Hmm.” She taps her foot on the floor of the car. “Don’t be a jerk anymore.”

“I won’t.” *I hope.*

“Are you going to tell me where we’re...” Kathryn pauses. “Hang on, I know where we’re going. This is in the direction of Bette and Benjamin Doyle’s house. Are we going to their garden?”

“I should’ve blindfolded you,” I say and reach for her hand.

“Ohh, I liked it there. Remember, that was our first date. You made a picnic, and we sat under one of the trees.” Kathryn unlinks our hands and runs her finger across her mouth. “I remember our kiss in the garden.”

“I do too.” The thought of kissing Kathryn is making my cock stir. Thankfully, I pull up at the Doyles’ and quickly exit the car to readjust my jeans because that was beginning to be quite uncomfortable. I open the door for Kathryn and hold my hand out to her. “Ma’am.”

“Thank you, kind sir.” She places her small, warm hand in mine, and I help her out of the car. “Why did Mr. Grumpy bring me here?” Kathryn closes her eyes and takes a long, slow breath. I love watching her. She has such a zest for life, and an appreciation for the simple things. She never takes anything for granted either. I love that about my girl.

“I thought we had dinner, so why not have dessert under the stars?”

She opens her eyes and stares at me, slowly squinting. Kathryn lifts her chin and arches a brow, clearly suspicious. “You’re up to something.”

“No, I’m not,” I reply with haste. “I’m not at all.” I open the back door and grab the picnic basket with the container holding the piece of decadent chocolate cake I stashed in here while she ducked into the bathroom at dinner. “See, just cake.”

Kathryn narrows her eyes and purses her lips into a thin, tight line. “Hmmm.”

I grab her hand and start tugging her toward the back. “Hurry up, woman.”

“Woman? Wow, such a gentleman.” When we reach the back, there are thousands of twinkle lights wrapped around so many of the trees. “How perfect does this look?”

“It does,” I agree.

“This garden is like nothing I’ve ever seen before. I just love it here.” She snuggles into me as we walk down to the spot we claimed all those years ago. “Promise me something.”

“What?” When we reach our spot, I take the blanket from inside the picnic basket and place it on the ground.

“Promise me that whenever we come back here, we ask the Doyles if we can picnic in their garden.”

“I promise you, we’ll do that.”

She sits on the picnic blanket and takes off her shoes. Kathryn leans back and looks up at the stars. “I thought Mom would’ve freaked out, I’m relieved she didn’t.”

“Your mom just wants you happy.”

“I was so worried about it, and I’m kicking myself for not saying anything to her sooner. But I made a promise to myself that I won’t let fear stop me from saying what I need to say from here on in.” I crack open the container with the chocolate cake and take out a spoon. “Do we have to share a spoon, or do I get to sit here and watch you eat?”

I scoot closer to her and scoop a small piece of cake. “I’m going to feed you.”

“Oh, are you?” Kathryn sits up and crosses her legs under her body. She closes her eyes and opens her mouth, and my cock springs to life. She’s deliciously sexy. I feed her the cake, and Kathryn slowly chews it, making appreciative sounds. “Mmm. So good.”

My heart twists in my chest as I watch her tongue peep out and sweep across her lower lip, catching a tiny crumb of cake. I want to keep feeding her just to watch her mouth move. “I’ve been thinking about something,” I say.

Kathryn’s eyes open and she stares into mine. “What?”

I cut off another piece of cake and lift the spoon to her mouth. Her lips part as she waits for my offering. My pulse quickens and my skin heats with desire. “I want you to have something.” She again licks her bottom lip, making my heart skip a beat. “You have no idea the effect you have on me.”

“That’s a good thing.” Kathryn cheekily smiles. “Are you going to tell me what you want me to have?”

Fuck.

This is it. This is where she’ll either walk out of my life forever, or be in it until the day we take our last breaths. I move to one knee, then reach into

the picnic basket and produce a black velvet box. “I want you forever. I want to grow old with you. Let’s spend the rest of our lives loving and fighting and just being.” I hold my breath and watch as my girl’s eyes become glassy with tears. “From the moment I saw you, I knew you were my happily ever after. Kathryn, will you marry me?” I offer Kathryn the ring I’ve been saving for since the day I first saw her.

Kathryn covers her mouth with her hands, and her eyes are now filled with tears. She nods her head and whispers, “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

I slide the ring on her finger, then pull her into my body. In this moment, my life is complete. There’s nothing Kathryn and I can’t accomplish, *together*.

“Forever,” I say.

“Forever,” she whispers before I claim her mouth with a deep and passionate kiss.

PART II

WE HELD THE WORLD IN OUR
HANDS...

UNTIL IT ALL CAME CRASHING DOWN.

KATHRYN

Bennett is pacing back and forth while watching between the TVs set up at headquarters. I look around the room at the flurry of people. “Liam,” I call.

He walks over and sits beside me. “What can I do for you?” He cracks open a soda and takes a long drink.

“How are the polls looking?” I ask in a small voice, so Bennett doesn’t hear.

“It’ll come down to Florida, Pennsylvania, and Minnesota. But we know they can swing either way.” He lifts his shoulders.

“If we lose Florida though...” my voice trails.

“It’s all over.”

“Hurry the fuck up!” Bennett screams at the TVs.

Liam and I both turn to face Bennett who’s a complete mess as he paces, staring at the country broken into red, blue, and unassigned colors. “I’m taking him out of this,” I say to Liam.

“I think that’s a good idea.”

I stand from where Liam and I are sitting beside one another and walk over to Bennett. His suit jacket is off, and his shirt sleeves are rolled up to his elbows. His hair is disheveled and his eyes are wild and hyper-focused on the screens. “Bennett,” I say as I approach him like I would a wounded animal. I reach out and place my hand on his tense forearm.

Bennett startles when he feels my touch. He turns to me and stares. “What is it?”

“We’re leaving.”

“What?” Bennett runs his hands through his hair and grumbles with

dissatisfaction. “I’m not leaving. They might call this—”

“Stop.” I push my way into his personal space and wrap my arms around his middle. “You’re driving yourself crazy.”

“This is my life, Kathryn,” he spits with contempt. I look to Liam and slowly gesture for him to vacate the room. Liam stands and walks out, leaving Bennett alone with me. I unwind my arms from him, pick up the remotes, and turn all the TVs off. “What are you doing?” He reaches for the remotes, but I hold them behind my back.

“You’re being a jackass, Bennett Adams. And I’ve had it up to here with you being a snappy asshat.” Bennett shuts his mouth and lifts his brows with surprise. “We’re leaving.”

“I’m sorry, Kathryn, I shouldn’t have snapped at you. But no. We’re not going anywhere.”

“So help me God, if you don’t leave with me right now, you’ll be announcing your divorce at inauguration.” He opens his mouth to argue but I silence him with a hard look. “Unroll your sleeves, put your jacket on, and fix your God damned hair.”

Bennett pinches the bridge of his nose, but finally capitulates with a deep exhale. “You’re so bossy.”

“Damn straight I am, mister. You’re gonna put yourself in an early grave if you stay holed up in here.”

“Where are we going?”

“Out to dinner. There’s that little Italian restaurant you like down near our old apartment.”

A relaxed smile stretches his lips as he rolls his shirt sleeves down. “We haven’t been there in such a long time.” Slowly, he begins to loosen.

“It’s been well over twelve months since we’ve had dinner there.” I glance outside to see if I can catch Mark’s attention. Thankfully, he’s standing outside the room—like normal—and enters when I beckon him to come in.

“Ma’am,” Mark says.

“Bennett and I are leaving. We’re heading to The Pasta Warehouse for dinner.”

“Ma’am, my team needs to do a sweep of the restaurant to make sure it’s clear.”

I leave Bennett and walk over to Mark. “I know you have protocol, Mark, but…” I look behind me and lower my voice. “He’s losing his mind, and on

the verge of collapse. I need to get him away from this, even if it's only for an hour." I silently plead, hoping he understands how much Bennett needs the reprieve.

Mark is one fine Secret Service agent, and I hope *when* Bennett becomes president that Mark will keep protecting him. Mark looks to Bennett, then back to me. "I'll get it arranged."

I lift my eyes up toward heaven and release a relieved breath. "Thank you, Mark."

"You're welcome, ma'am." Mark proceeds to take all the necessary precautions for us to be able to leave.

"Bennett," I call as I walk over to him. He's managed to turn one of the TVs on and has it muted. He's standing in front of the TV, his legs hip-width apart, his left arm wrapped around his waist while his right hand is pinching his chin.

"Fuck!" he yells.

"What is it?" I look at the screen and groan when I see we've lost Nevada.

"Nevada," he groans and places his hands on his head as he paces. Out of the corner of my eyes, I see Mark give me a nod. The Secret Service certainly works fast. I reach for the remote and switch the TV off. "What are you doing?"

I lower the remote, walk over to where his suit jacket is slung over the back of a chair, and lift it for him to slide it on. "I told you."

"But—"

"That's it, Bennett. We're getting out of here."

"They might call it while we're out."

"Liam will phone if they do." I fix his jacket once he's in it and run my hand through his hair.

"I should stay with the team just in case." My jaw jumps as I stare up at my husband. He swallows and averts his eyes. "An hour won't hurt."

"Good." I take my jacket and slide it on. "Let's go."

Bennett looks to the blank TV, then back to me. I extend my hand, which he takes and we head out of the massive office to the room where the team has gathered. The team quietens when they see us emerge from the office we've been in since the campaign started. "Esther," Bennett starts.

"Yes, sir."

"Kathryn and I are stepping out for an hour."

Esther smiles broadly. “That’s a good idea, sir.”

She looks to me and I release Bennett’s hand and step in to hug her. I whisper, “Thank you for everything you’ve done for us.” Esther is older and more like a young grandmother to the entire team. She’s been with us since she came and saw Bennett speak at the start of his election run. She was staunch in her beliefs and was there to debunk anything Bennett had to say, but once she heard him speak, she injected herself into his campaign. Since then, she’s been an integral part of helping him stay on track with all his commitments. “You’ve been amazing.”

“It’s been my absolute honor, ma’am.” Esther steps back and looks at Bennett. “You need a good meal in your stomach, because before you know it, Liam or I will be calling you to tell you you’re the new president-elect.”

Bennett gives Esther a hug. “Thank you.”

With tension lingering in the air, Bennett and I leave the headquarters with Mark following.

There’s no doubt in my mind that Bennett is nervous, and now that we’ve lost Nevada, it’ll make him being elected even harder.

Once we’re in the car, Bennett stares out the window. His entire body is tight and his leg bounces agitatedly. A paralyzing stench of fear clings in the air. I hate this for him, but there’s literally nothing I can do to make it better. I place my hand on his bouncing leg and give it a reassuring squeeze.

He looks over to me and offers me a stressed smile.

Neither Bennett nor I want this to be over. We’ve worked so hard to get him to this point, and we’re so close to it. The cars travel through the streets, and once we’re at The Pasta Warehouse, they park on the street right outside.

“We need to clear the restaurant,” Mark says.

“No,” Bennett says. “You’re not clearing it. If people are eating, let them be.”

“Sir, there may be a security breach.”

“I doubt people are waiting for me at The Pasta Warehouse.”

“Sir, I must insist that you allow us to do our job.”

“I’ll take the heat for it, Mark,” Bennett says.

I smile to Bennett. I’m proud of him for sticking to his values. “We’ll be fine, Mark.”

Mark’s rigid posture gives nothing away. He lifts his hand and speaks into his comms unit. I don’t quite catch what he says, but I assume all is okay considering the door opens and Grayson, my Secret Service agent, appears.

“Sir.” Grayson is like a hawk as he carefully surveys the area around us.

Bennett and I exit the vehicle and begin to make our way into the restaurant. The restaurant is about two-thirds full, and the host does a double take at us when we enter. “Table for two please,” I say as I step in front of Bennett.

“Of course, we have a private dining room ready for you.” Clearly, he knows who Bennett is.

“No, not private. We’ll stay out here if there’s a table available,” I say.

The host looks behind me, then to Bennett, then to me. He’s confused by my request and it must be directly opposite to what the Secret Service has set up. “But—”

“Out here is fine,” I insist.

“But there are people out here.”

It’ll be a distraction for Bennett. He’ll be able to talk to people and put the pressure of the election on hold, even if only for an hour. “It will be fine,” I assure him.

“Of course,” the host says as he moves from behind his podium and shows us to a table in the back.

The room fills with whispers, but once we’re seated and have ordered, the whispers die down. “Excuse me,” someone says.

“Hi,” I greet him with a smile. This is exactly what Bennett needs. Regardless if the person is going to hate or love Bennett, he needs the diversion of a human connection.

“Mr. Adams, I just want to say I’ve been voting since I was legally allowed to.”

“Thank you for voting. Our country needs to hear the people’s voices,” Bennett replies.

“I had my mind made up from the beginning that I wasn’t going to vote for you.”

I take in a small breath and hold it. Bennett’s been stressed, but I know he’ll still handle something like this graciously. “It makes me proud to know that you did in fact vote, regardless that it wasn’t for me.” Bennett grins at the guy standing at our table.

“I did vote for you.”

“Oh,” I say, surprised by his statement. “Why?”

“Because I watched you and the other candidate very closely, and there was a massive difference between you.” He looks to me. “And my wife just

adores you.” He smiles. “She voted for you because of your wife.”

“Aw, thank you,” I say feeling good about that.

Bennett gestures for the man to sit. “Please.” Bennett holds his hand out and shakes the man’s hand. “What’s your name?”

“Jackson.”

“Very nice to meet you, Jackson,” I say and shake his hand.

“What made you change your vote?” Bennett asks.

“You don’t use fear as a motivator, and I like that. My wife and I were discussing how the other guy was happy to point and scream about how the sky was falling down and exactly whose fault it was. You said yes, the sky is falling down, but let’s fix it so it doesn’t. You never pointed fingers, or made anyone look bad. We both liked that about you.”

“Thank you,” Bennett says. “Is your wife here with you tonight?”

“Actually, no, I was sent to pick up an order.” Jackson looks to the host’s stand where the host indicates that his order is ready. “I should go, but I sincerely hope you win this.” He shakes my hand and Bennett’s, then stands.

“Thank you for voting,” Bennett says once again. “Especially considering it was for me.”

Jackson chuckles, nods his head, then leaves the table.

“You have integrity among the voters. If one person saw it, then I’m sure millions more did too,” I say.

“You helped.”

“Obviously. I’m the loveable wife,” I say with a smile.

Bennett chuckles and shakes his head. He leans over and whispers, “I’m going to fuck you when we return home.” I do my best to hold in my smirk.

I lean into Bennett and kiss his jaw. “Good.”

“The spinach and ricotta cannelloni?” the waiter asks as he stands in front of our table.

“That would be me,” I say and sit back so he can place the piping hot plate in front of me.

“Bacon linguine would be yours, sir?”

“Certainly is.” The waiter lays the white bowl in front of Bennett.

“Cracked pepper or extra parmesan?”

Bennett’s eyes widen when he sees the parmesan and I know if he’s given the opportunity he’d inhale all of it. “No, thank you,” I say before Bennett has the chance to gorge himself.

The server smiles and leaves. “Seriously,” Bennett playfully grumbles.

I look to him and knowingly wink before digging into my dinner. Thankfully, Bennett relaxes as the moments morph into an hour, then another. A few more people approach us and give us their well-wishes. Some grumble that they didn't vote for Bennett, but he's quite diplomatic and gracious with his replies.

We're halfway through dessert when Mark appears at the table. "Sir, Liam's asked for you to return to base."

Shit, this might be it. Bennett takes his phone out of his pocket but I place my hand over it. "Wait until we're back at base," I encourage.

Whatever the news, if there is any, he needs to be with the people who've worked tirelessly for him. We stand from our table and Mark informs us he's already taken care of the bill.

We'll need to reimburse him once we're back at base.

"Are you okay?" We link our fingers as we make our way back to the office.

"I feel sick to my stomach, Kathryn. I'm nervous, and jittery. I'm not sure what to expect."

"It'll be okay." I give his hand a reassuring gentle squeeze. "We were in a bubble for a little while but regardless of what happens, it'll all work out the way it's supposed to."

"It's too early to call. I don't know why I'm being summoned." He looks to me and closes his eyes, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Unless we lost Florida and Michigan."

The ride back to base feels like it's taking hours and when we reach the office, Liam is already waiting for us outside.

He's pacing back and forth and when he sees the car, he rips the door open.

Bennett is out of the car and holding his hand out to me while speaking to Liam. "Has it been called?"

"Not yet. It's still close."

"Why were we summoned?"

"Trust me, you need to come in."

I liked not having any news or polls happening for the time we were at the restaurant. As we enter base, it's so quiet you can hear a pin drop.

"What's going on?"

Liam picks up the phone, dials a number, and says, "I have Bennett Adams for you." He hands Bennett the phone.

“Hello?” Bennett looks toward me, then down at his feet. “Thank you.” He nods several times as he paces with his head down. A few words are said, but I can’t make out who’s on the phone with him. I lift my fingers and chew on my thumbnail, nervously waiting for Bennett. “Thank you,” he adds and finally ends the call.

“What’s going on?” I ask.

“Thomas Meyers...” Oh shit, the guy Bennett was up against. “Has offered me his congratulations for a well-run campaign.”

“What does this mean?” I ask.

“He’s conceding,” Liam interjects.

We all turn to the TVs in case there’s been a shift.

“Nothing has changed though,” Bennett says. “We’re still so damn close, why would he—” And just like that, Florida is called.

Tears well in my eyes as we all stand watching the state of Florida become a definite color. *Our color.*

“Have you just become the youngest ever president-elect?” I ask in a small voice.

The entire room bursts into applause. Bennett’s campaign manager steps forward and congratulates him, while I stand in awe mentally calculating the numbers.

While everyone is celebrating, Georgia is called in our favor too. Without turning, I search behind me, trying to find Bennett so I can show him. But I’m hitting air and nothing else. It’s almost like a domino effect. More states call it with only a handful left.

His warm arms wrap around my waist. “We did it,” he whispers amidst the chaos of the base.

I turn in his arms and kiss his lips.

“Mr. President,” Liam says. Tears cling to my cheeks and I watch as Bennett straightens, adjust his tie, and turns to address his team.

I couldn’t be prouder of my husband, *the president.*

BENNETT

Sitting on the blue armchair by the ornate windows, I watch as Kathryn sleeps peacefully. Our room is shrouded in darkness; the sun has yet to break over the horizon. I smile at Kathryn's innocent stirring and reaching out. Even in her sleep, she's searching for me.

I adore her more every day.

A small wanton mew escapes her pretty lips. Kathryn's eyes flutter open as a slow smile stretches her mouth. "What are you doing over there?"

"Watching you sleep."

She smirks and pats the bed. "Stalker," she quips. "This side of the bed is cold without you in it." Standing, I walk over to my wife and pull the covers back. I slide into bed and watch as she tucks her hands beneath her head. "Are you nervous?"

"Absolutely terrified," I openly admit as I lay my hand on her hip beneath the covers and drag her closer to me.

Kathryn removes her left hand from under the pillow and playfully taps her lip. "Hmmm." She stares at me blankly. "I wonder why you're so nervous. It's not like you're being sworn in as president today."

I nuzzle into her neck and a loud squeal echoes through the room. "You don't have to be nervous, Bennett. This is what we've been preparing for." Her mood softens into something more serious. "Liam wouldn't have agreed to be your chief of staff if he didn't have faith in you. The entire team, all of your advisors, have faith in you and what you're going to do for our country." She leans over and gently places a kiss on my lips.

"I know that, but I'm terrified I'm going to fuck it all up."

Kathryn lifts her hand and places it on the scruff of my jaw. "Don't ever

forget, you have a great woman standing beside you.” She cracks a devious smile. “I guess I could take over and *you* can be the pretty face.”

I grab Kathryn and roll her on her back while I hover over her body. “You’re doing an incredible job of distracting me, Mrs. Adams.” Kathryn’s legs part slightly, allowing me to nestle between them.

“Distracting you?” Her body wiggles beneath me as she lines her body up with mine. “Like this?” Kathryn snakes her hands under my t-shirt and scrapes her nails up and down my back.

Lowering my head, I pepper kisses from her mouth, down the column of her throat and then descend further down her body. I lift her nightgown and kiss her stomach. “I want this belly to hold my baby.” I continue kissing her stomach. “I want you pregnant, Kathryn.”

She pushes her fingers into my hair and tugs on the ends. “I’ve been thinking about it too.”

Lifting my head, I look up at her. “You have?” Kathryn nods and smiles. “Then why don’t we start trying?”

She takes a bracing breath as she averts her eyes. My stomach drops at her reluctant reply. “I want to, but...” Kathryn wets her lips before gulping. “I’m not sure now is a good time, Bennett. You’ll be taking office as of noon today, and so much is going to be crazy.”

“That won’t last for long.”

Kathryn’s brows rise. “Really? At least for the next four years, if not eight.”

I lay my head on her stomach, hating how we’re not in sync about having a baby. “I’m not waiting four damned years to become a father, Kathryn.”

“How about this?” She begins her negotiations. “If everything is going smoothly and neither of us are under too much stress, we can start trying to get pregnant around Christmas.”

“What?” I lift my head to look at her. “That’s eleven months away. No. I don’t want us to wait that long. By Easter,” I counter without giving Kathryn any wriggle room.

“Easter? Are you totally mad? That’s April, only three months away. No, that’s too close, Bennett. We won’t even be settled into our roles at the White House. No.” She shakes her head adamantly. “Best I can offer is November.”

“No.” I push off her and jump off the bed. “I’m not waiting that long. I want you pregnant with my baby sooner than later.”

Kathryn sits up in the bed and brings her knees up to hug them. She

smirks and rolls her eyes. “I want a baby with you very badly, but I’m not ready yet, Bennett. I just need a little time to settle into this crazy new life of ours. Which, incidentally, is no longer ours. We now belong to the American people.”

I pace back and forth, attempting to understand Kathryn’s reservations. I stop walking and turn to stare at my beautiful wife. “My birthday. You’ll stop taking your pills and we’ll start trying on the night of my birthday.”

Her features soften while a small smile stretches her lips. “Come here.” Kathryn lifts her finger and beckons me over. “I think we need to practice, just to make sure we get it right, since your birthday’s in June.”

Yes! In June, we’re going to start trying for a baby. I rip my t-shirt off over my head, and lower my boxer briefs, exposing my hard cock. “Lay on your back, and hang your head over the side of the bed.”

Kathryn licks her lips slowly as she stares at me. Arching a brow, she bites her lower lip. She lifts her eyes to scan up my body before making eye contact with me. “I’m particularly hungry this morning, Mr. Adams.” Kathryn lays on her back with her head on the edge of the bed.

I lean down and whisper, “Fuck your fingers.”

“I serve at the pleasure of my president,” she says in a husky tone. Kathryn squirms out of her nightgown, exposing her perfect, beautiful body to me. She opens her legs, licks two of her fingers and slowly trails them down her body until she inserts them into her pretty pussy. “Hmmm,” she groans as she closes her eyes. With my knees on the edge of the bed on either side of her head, I lower myself until she’s taken my cock into her mouth. “Hmmm.” She slurps as she takes me in her mouth, and I slowly roll my hips to fuck her face.

I keep an eye on her fingers as they slowly play with her glistening pussy. She pulls her fingers out and they sparkle with her delicious wetness. I can’t restrain myself, not when it comes to my wife. I smack her hand away and bury my nose into her pussy. I can’t eat her the way I love, so I pull my face away and move off the bed. “You’re such a dirty girl,” I say. “But I need more. I’m starving for you.” I hold my hand out to her. She takes my hand and I help her off the bed. What started with me fucking her mouth has progressed to me needing more of her. I lie on the bed and gesture for her to come over to me. “Come here. Turn around, and sit on my face. I want to eat you while I fuck this mouth of yours.” I run my fingertips over her lips.

“And you say *I’m* a dirty girl. I think you’re a dirty man.”

“Only for my girl.” I help her ease herself onto my face. I grab her hips and hold her in place so my mouth and tongue have the best access to her. Kathryn lowers and takes me deep into her mouth while grinding her hips against me.

God, this is crazy good. I can suck on her clit, nibble at her lips, and tongue fuck her while my cock is buried deep down her throat. My fingers flex around her fleshy hips as I hungrily cram as much of her pussy into my mouth as I can. Closing my eyes, I concentrate on all the sensations happening in this moment. My heart is pounding as I tighten my grip and attempt to pull her further down onto me. I’m a thirsty man, begging for more of her on my tongue. I need Kathryn to come, to give me every drop of her tasty cum.

Kathryn groans as she pulls away from my cock. “Jesus,” she says and tries to get off my face. I hold her in place, not allowing her to move until I’m rewarded with every drop of her. “I’m coming.” I use my arms like vices, holding her to me while I keep tongue fucking her. She grinds her hips against me. I just need to have her come. “I’m coming,” she moans.

Her smell is intoxicating, and her overwhelming urge to get off my face sends me crazy. If I could live here for the rest of my life, I would happily die with Kathryn’s pussy on my face. A ferocious roar grumbles through my chest as she tries to get away from me. Her body trembles as I continue to use my mouth and tongue to stroke and sweep over her sensitive pussy. “Hmmm.”

Kathryn’s hips speed up and her thighs tighten, letting me know she’s coming. She collapses against my stomach and takes several deep breaths. I pull my face away and regain control to go in for seconds. “What are you doing?”

“I’m still thirsty.”

“You’re insatiable. But it’s my turn.” She lowers to take me in her mouth. I know it’s going to be harder to get Kathryn off for a second time, but that’s not going to stop me from trying. Her mouth is like liquid gold. As much as I love gorging on her pussy, she loves having my cock in her mouth. God, she’s perfect. There’s a lot of slurps and sucking going on from her. She scrapes her teeth over the head of my cock, and I nearly lose my load in that very second. Her mouth is pure heaven. I try to concentrate on what I’m doing, but when her tongue flicks across my sensitive head, and she swallows me as far as she can take me, making her gag, my balls draw up and I feel

myself about to come. I want to hold her head in place and fuck her mouth, but I'm powerless when it comes to Kathryn. She completely owns me.

"I'm going to come in your mouth," I warn in case she wants to sit on me.

Her actions intensify. There's a lot of gulping and gagging. The only thing I regret is not being able to watch her fuck me, but I'm rewarded with her pussy on my mouth.

She sucks on my cock until I finally lose myself in her mouth. My body pulsates as my cock spurts ribbons of cum down her throat. Greedily, she continues to suck and slurp, taking everything I give her. As my body winds down, I have difficulty attempting to concentrate. I really want to fuck her with my tongue again, but I'm damn near spent. Kathryn climbs off and lies beside me. I touch her lips and smile to see how I've made them slightly puffy and red. "I love it when your lips say your mouth has been fucked."

She smirks at me. Touching my face, she runs her hand down my cheek to my chin. "I love what you do with your tongue." Kathryn leans over and softly kisses my mouth. "You're going to be a good president," she whispers. "You've got my vote."

There's a tender moment between us. Kathryn has managed to calm me. "I love you," I say as I stare into her big, brown eyes.

"I should hope so," she replies. Her tongue darts out and sweeps across her lower lip. Kathryn takes a breath and looks around the room. "How many presidents do you think have gotten their freak on in this room?"

"Blair House is the residence diplomats and the presidents-elect have used ever since it was purchased by the government in 1942. So, if I have to take an educated guess, I'd say at least..." I shake my head slightly and smirk. "A lot."

"I wonder how many have been super freaky in this room. Oh." Kathryn's eyes widen. "Do you think this room has seen prostitutes or drugs?"

"Prostitutes and drugs? Really? That's what you're thinking about this morning?"

Kathryn taps her finger to her chin. "I wonder how many presidents have had threesomes in here."

"I swear to God, I'm going to have to fuck this mouth of yours again if you keep talking about sex, drugs, and threesomes."

Kathryn laughs as she playfully arches her back. She turns to me and with a sinister sparkle she says, "What about an orgy?" She's pushing me, and I'm

barely holding onto my resolve. My cock stirs to life again, desperate to be buried inside of her.

I move to hover over her body and smash my mouth over hers as she wraps her legs around my hips. I silence her murmur with my mouth as I push into her. My girl wants to be fucked, so a fucking is what she's going to get.

KATHRYN

I look at the dress I've chosen for the inauguration ball hanging in the massive walk-in closet and smile. I know the advisors said the entire country looks to the First Lady's inauguration ball gown to see what type of First Lady she will be.

My stomach churns as I smile. A part of me thinks I should've gone with something a lot more traditional, but I think this is a dress that can stand the test of time. It's simply beautiful.

With my hair and makeup already completed, I slide the silk robe off my body and remove the dress from the hanger. The fabric is cool as I run my fingers across the material. Judging by the weight of this dress, it's undeniably made with care and love. The designer, Millie, an unknown American woman, spent many a day with me in order to perfect this amazing dress.

There's a knock on the door, and I quickly shrug back into my robe before calling, "Come in." Millie opens the door and closes it behind her once she's in the room. "I'm about to put on this amazing dress."

Millie's eyes widen when she sees the dress on the bed. There's a massive smile on her face. "May I assist you in dressing, Mrs. Adams?"

"Of course."

Millie lifts the dress off the bed and holds it up as she waits for me to disrobe. Modesty has been thrown out the window with the number of hours Millie and I have spent together. "Are you looking forward to the ball, ma'am?" she asks with a hint of nervousness.

"I'm not really sure what to expect. I spoke with the former First Lady and she told me that all eyes will be on us. I'm hoping I don't trip and fall."

Millie chuckles. “You’re beautiful and elegant, so I highly doubt that’ll ever happen. I’m more worried that my dress may malfunction and embarrass you.”

She unzips the concealed side zipper, leans down and holds the dress open so I can step into it. “There’s no chance that’s going to happen.” As daintily as possible, I step into the dress, being extra careful not to step on the material. “The Smithsonian will likely be contacting me and ask if I’d like to donate an article of clothing for their First Lady exhibit. I’m wondering if you’d be okay with me donating this dress?”

Millie slowly stands to her feet and helps me with the dress. “You’d do that, ma’am?” There’s a tremble in her voice, but I can’t see her because she’s standing behind me.

I whip my head around to see Millie has tears in her eyes. “If you don’t want me to, I won’t.”

“Oh my gosh!” She places her hand to her chest. “I was honored when you asked me to design this dress, but right now, I could hug you so hard. You have no idea what an honor this is for me!”

“Just so we’re clear, I’ll be donating this very dress.”

Millie’s eyes redden as she slowly nods with a knowing smile. “You know, when I told my mom I was designing this dress for you, she cried with happiness.”

“Aww, how beautiful. Did she?”

“Would you mind if I took a photo of you in it? I know I shouldn’t ask, but I promise I won’t share it with anyone. I just want to show Mom when I get back home.”

I know there’s protocol and I should say no, but the happiness bouncing off her makes it near impossible for me to decline her request. “I tell you what,” I say. “Why don’t you FaceTime with your mom, and I’ll show her in person?”

Millie’s chin quivers. “You’d do that?”

“Absolutely.” I smile as I rub my hands up and down her arms.

“Ma’am, I’d be eternally grateful to you. You have no idea what you’ve done, not only for my career, but also what this means to Mom.”

“It’s fairly clear to me you’re close with your mom.”

“I am.” She pulls in a deep breath. “Mom has been my biggest supporter.” She lowers her chin and looks down for a split second before raising her gaze to me. “I wanted to go to one of the top fashion schools, but

Mom didn't have the money. She tried, but it wasn't meant to be." Millie lifts her left shoulder. "I cried when I found out, but Mom told me I didn't need a fancy school to design beautiful gowns."

"Look where you are today. Standing in Blair House with me."

"The First Lady."

"I really hope you're proud of this amazing dress. You know, no one will be looking at me, the entire world will be talking about this remarkable dress." I run my hands down over my stomach and hips. "It's perfect."

"You're too kind, ma'am. But trust me when I say you make the dress, not the other way around. I don't think anyone would be able to wear this dress anywhere near as beautifully as you do. And we haven't even accessorized it yet," she says in a small voice.

I hope Millie's career explodes from here, because she's talented, modest, and humble. It's one of the reasons I chose her to design my inauguration dress. "Millie, you deserve the world, and I hope this helps propel you toward getting everything you want."

"I can't thank you enough. This has been an amazing opportunity for me and my mom."

I give Millie a small hug and suck in a deep breath. "Let's finish getting ready, and you can FaceTime with your mom."

I know we're short on time, and I expect Bennett will be in the library, sitting in front of the roaring fire reading a legislative memo, trying to get a head start on the massive job we have in front of us.

It takes another half hour before we're ready for the FaceTime call with Millie's mom. "You look perfect, Mrs. Adams." Millie stands back and admires her gorgeous ball gown. "If I may, ma'am?" Her brows crinkle as she stares at me.

"Of course, what is it?" A slight panic bubbles in my chest. *Is everything okay?*

"I'm so in love with you in my dress," she says as tears prickle her eyes again. I love how proud she is of what she's created.

"I'm so in love with your dress, I'm seriously reconsidering gifting it to the Smithsonian, because I want to wear it again." I smooth the dress down once more.

"I'll make you another one," she says without missing a beat. "Anything you want, I'll make it." She takes a breath and steps back. "You're ready, ma'am."

“No, I’m not. We still need to call your mom.”

“Really?” she asks with surprise. “I thought you only said that to be nice.”

I smile as I gently shake my head. “Have you got your phone?”

“No, ma’am, it was taken from me when I arrived.”

“Was it?” She nods. I walk over to the door and open it. I find my Secret Service head of detail, Grayson, standing outside the door. “Grayson.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Can you get Millie’s phone for me please?” His brows crinkle slightly. “Now, please.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Thank you.” I close the door and walk back in. I stand in front of the mirror and look at the long, black, fitted gown with the small train. The scooped neckline shows a hint of cleavage without giving too much away. The silver heels, silver clutch, and white gold diamond hoop earrings, break the gown up perfectly. “I’m totally in love with this entire ensemble.”

“So am I,” Millie giddily replies.

There’s a knock on the door, and I instruct them to enter. Grayson walks in and hands me Millie’s phone. “Thank you.”

Grayson exits the room and closes the door behind him. “Here you go.” I pass the phone onto Millie. “It’s time to call your mom.”

I’ve never seen such a remarkable smile on anyone’s face. Millie dials her mom and waits for her to answer. “Hey, darling, how was it?” her mom lovingly asks.

“I’m still here, Mom.”

“Oh, are you?” I notice the change in her voice. It becomes tenser and more rigid. “Are you leaving soon?”

“Um.” She looks over the phone to me.

I walk around and stand beside Millie. “Hello, ma’am,” I say, once in view. Her eyes widen and her mouth gapes open. “I just wanted to show you this wonderful dress Millie created for me.”

“Oh my goodness! Mrs. Adams...oh my!” She’s at a loss for words as she stares at the screen.

“Millie is an amazing designer, and an even better person. You should be very proud of her. You’ve brought up a simply beautiful human.”

“Oh my,” she repeats as she places her hand on her chest. “There’s no way I can repay you for what you’ve done for my Millie. Thank you.”

“I should be the one thanking you and Millie. But I’m pressed for time, and I wanted to show you before the world sees how perfect your daughter’s creation is.” I look to Millie. “Step back and show your mom.”

Millie takes a step backward and shows her mom. “Darling, I’m so proud of you! Mrs. Adams, you’re breathtaking. Thank you for taking time to call me.”

“I have to go, Mom.”

“Call me when you leave.”

“I will.”

“Love you, Millie.”

“Love you, too.”

It warms my heart to see such an incredible bond between a mother and her daughter. One day, I’m hoping I have the same thing too. *When the time is right.*

Millie hangs up and slides her phone into her pocket. “One last thing,” I say.

“Of course. What is it, ma’am?”

“Get your phone out again.”

Millie hesitantly reaches into her pocket and retrieves her phone. With a worried look she unlocks her phone. “I didn’t take any pictures, I promise. Look.” She brings her camera roll up and hands it to me.

“I believe you, Millie. But I think we should take a selfie together, although I would appreciate it if you don’t post it until tomorrow.”

“I can post it?”

“Sure can, but tomorrow, okay?” Nope, I was wrong. *This* smile is the largest I’ve ever seen. “Come on.”

She walks around and aims the camera at us. I place my arm around her shoulder, and she takes a picture. Millie pulls the phone away and stares at the photo. “My life is brilliant,” she whispers.

“I’m sorry, Millie, but now you need to leave.”

She looks up and smiles. She hugs me before stepping back and collecting herself. “Thank you for everything you’ve done for me. And I promise, I’ll wait until tomorrow to post this.” Millie gathers her things and leaves the room.

I look myself over again, just to triple-check that I still look fabulous. I smile at my reflection in the mirror and head out to find Bennett. Oh, I nearly forgot. I quickly return to where I’ve been hiding the present I secretly

bought. Once I've retrieved the box with the bow, I open the door to see Grayson is ready to follow. "Grayson, do you know where my husband is?"

"Yes, ma'am, he's in the library."

Of course he is. "Thank you." I head toward the Blair House library. I find Bennett sitting by the roaring fire, with one leg crossed over the other, his glasses perched on the bridge of his nose while he's intently reading a thick, old book. I clear my throat when he doesn't even realize I've walked into the room.

Bennett looks up and inhales a sharp gasp. He opens his mouth to speak, but is unable to say anything. Carefully, he lays the book on the coffee table beside him and stands. "Wow," he finally manages to whisper.

I can't drag my eyes off of his fitted black tuxedo. The crisp white shirt pops against his dark tie. I can't help but smile as he saunters toward me. "You look amazing." I notice the tie is black with a delicate webbing of translucent silver threads.

"Me?" His cheeks fill with air that he slowly expels. "Not one person is going to be looking at me. You on the other hand." He reaches for my hands, but instantly notices the gift box. "What's this?"

"This—" I hand it to him. "—is for you."

"I should be buying you something, not the other way around." I can't wipe the massive smile off my face as I wait for him to open the box. "Should I open it now?"

"No, wait for Christmas, it's only eleven months away," I sarcastically retort. "Or maybe for your next inauguration."

Bennett lifts his chin to look at me and smirks. "You think I'll get reelected? I've been in office for all of six hours. The country might end up hating me."

"Impossible." I pointedly look at the box he's holding. "Today might be a good idea considering we have a ball to attend. I don't know about you, but I don't think we can blow this thing off."

"You can always blow me if you want."

My eyes widen as I discreetly look around to ensure the Secret Service agents aren't close to enough to have heard. "You're an ass," I say as I turn to face him, knowing both Grayson and Mark are standing in the room. Thankfully, both pretend to not have heard, but it doesn't stop the heat from burning my cheeks. "Open your damned present."

Bennett chuckles but eventually flicks the bow off and opens the box. His

brows rise as his mouth makes a perfect O. “Whoa.” He takes it out of the packet and studies it. “This is a beautiful Tag Hauer watch.”

“It’s silver. Matches me.”

“It’s perfect. Thank you, darling.” He quickly slides the watch on his left wrist and flicks the little buckle to keep it in place. Bennett steps into me and pulls me in for a hug. “I want to kiss you,” he whispers.

“You can’t, my makeup is done.”

He tenderly kisses my forehead. While in his arms, I feel him let out a long sigh. “Tonight, after the ball we’ll be arriving at the residence.” Although we’ve been living in the White House, I insisted on getting ready here before the several balls we need to attend, leading up to the last ball at the White House.

“Are you okay?”

“I know this is what we’ve worked so hard for, but it’s also overwhelming. I have the well-being of the entire United States of America in my hands. Every man, woman and child will be looking to me to make the hard decisions.”

I step back and look up into his dark expressive eyes. “And you’ll make them with confidence, because you have Liam who will always have your back, and you have me.”

“I love you.” He wraps me tighter against his body.

“I love you too, but we have to leave.”

“I know,” he acknowledges. It takes Bennett another moment or two to release me. He sucks in a deep breath, then looks over to Mark. Swallowing, he gives Mark a small nod. “I’m ready.”

“Good, so you should be.” I reach up and place a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth. “We’ve got this.”

“Yeah, we do.”

Seeing Bennett so vulnerable isn’t something I’m familiar with. He’s always so controlled and cool, even behind closed doors. But I know today he’s been nothing but nerves.

“Eagle on the move,” Mark says into his headset.

I look to Bennett and mouth *eagle* in question. “My code name.”

“Ah, yes, that’s right. What’s mine?”

“Echo, ma’am,” Mark responds.

I glance at Bennett and nod. “I can get on board with that. I like it. Echo.” I nod as we’re lead toward the garage. The motorcade is impressive and

intimidating at the same time. There's a plethora of Secret Service agents everywhere, ready to take us to the first of the inaugural balls.

Bennett helps me into the back of the car, then slides in next to me.

I clasp his hand as we make our way over to the first venue. His knee is bouncing slightly, and the palm of his hand has a faint hint of moisture. I squeeze his hand and he looks over at me. I smile, trying to ease his nerves. He leans over and kisses my cheek. "We've got this," he whispers.

We certainly do.

BENNETT

“Are you ready?” I call to Kathryn from outside the bathroom door.

“I will be when you stop harassing me,” she shouts.

I chuckle as I step back and shake my head. “Hurry up.” Pacing back and forth in our bedroom, I wait for Kathryn to emerge.

“Why? It’s not like we have far to go to get to work.”

“Stop being a smart-ass, and hurry up.” She opens the door, and I can’t help but fall more and more in love with her. “You look incredible.”

She lowers her chin to cast an eye over her office attire. “Have to make a good impression with the press corps today.” Kathryn glances up and down my body. “You look pretty good too.” She smiles when she sees my wrist. “Nice watch.”

“This incredibly sexy woman gave it to me last night.” I wrap Kathryn in my arms and peck her lips. “Don’t tell my wife, she’ll get mad at me, and she might try to poison me.” I playfully screw my mouth up. “I’m a bit of a bigwig now, and I might have some pull, so...”

Kathryn lightly smacks my shoulder before stepping away from me and lifting her chin with pride. “Are you ready for your first official day in office?”

“I certainly am.” There’s a knock on the bedroom door interrupting us. I walk over to open it and find Liam waiting. “Liam. Come in.” I wait for him to enter before shutting it again.

“Mr. President,” he says with a smile. “Mrs. Adams.”

Wow, I thought that was going to sound peculiar coming from my best friend, but I like it. “Liam, you don’t have to call me that, call me Kathryn, like normal.”

“No, ma’am, this is anything but normal. You’re the First Lady, and I’ll address you as the First Lady should be addressed.” Liam is a good person, and I completely respect him. “Are you ready?” Liam turns toward me.

“I think I am.” I hold my hand out for Kathryn. “Are you?”

“Of course.” She smiles warmly toward me, then Liam.

My heart is beating rapidly in my chest as we walk out of the bedroom. Mark and Grayson are both in the hallway, waiting for us. “Mark.” I give him a small nod.

“Mr. President.”

With my shoulders pulled back, and Kathryn by my side, a sense of relief washes over me. *This is what I was born to do, what we’ve been preparing for.* Once in the elevator, I gently squeeze Kathryn’s hand for reassurance. She looks up at me and shares a comforting smile. Kathryn leans over and places a small kiss on my cheek, then brings her hand up to wipe off any lipstick residue.

We head out and toward my office. Liam opens the door for me. “Mr. President,” he says as he waits for me to enter.

“Thank you.” Kathryn and I both enter the Oval Office.

To say this is surreal is a complete understatement. There’s an air of history, power, and a sense of gravity. Many of the men who served here before me have made spectacular decisions in this room that affect the lives of the American people, good and bad.

The Resolute desk is a grand and impressive sight. The chair has been replaced and is waiting for me to sit in. “Liam, give us a moment,” Kathryn says.

“Yes, ma’am.” He walks out the side door, closing it behind him.

“You okay?” Kathryn asks as I stare at the extraordinary desk.

“I am.” I swallow the nervousness back. She clasps my hands in hers, forcing me to look at her. “I am,” I repeat with more assurance.

“Good. Now, be the damned president.”

I smile at her forcefulness. I take a moment, staring at the desk, before moving behind it and sitting in the chair. I look toward Kathryn and give her a small wink. A sense of calm embodies me as my heart settles and I get ready for my first acts as the president. “Liam,” I call.

He opens the door and sees me sitting in the chair. “Mr. President,” he says as he smiles broadly. “May I say, sir, you suit the environment.” Cheeky bastard.

“I know. Ask Esther to come in.”

“Yes, sir.” Liam heads to the other side of the office from where he came in and opens the door. “Esther.”

On cue, Esther walks into the office carrying the black folders for the nine executive orders I’m signing today. “Mr. President.” She smiles proudly before placing the black folders on my desk.

I reach for her hand and lightly pat it. “I’m glad you accepted this job, Esther.”

Her eyes sparkle as she sucks in a breath. “I’m humbled and honored you asked me, sir.” How could I not hire her? She was instrumental in running my campaign by keeping my schedule and organizing dinners with key donors. There’s no one else like her.

I look to Liam and give him a small nod. Esther stands toward the back, and I notice how she can’t wipe the smile off of her face. This is a monumental moment in history, and I’ll be changing people’s lives. The entire country will be looking to me to make their lives better in one way or another. Liam opens the door and gives his instructions.

“Mr. President.” My deputy chief of staff, Alisha Hodges, enters and stands beside Liam.

My communications director, Elizabeth Owen, is the next one in.

“Mr. President,” Alison, my press secretary, announces as she walks in, trailed by some reporters from the press pool.

My vice president is missing, but that’s because I’ve already sent him to Switzerland to look at their healthcare services so we can attempt to implement some of their procedures here.

“Good morning,” I say once everyone is in the Oval Office.

There’s a constant clicking of cameras, as well as two video cameras on tripods being quickly set up.

Kathryn stands beside me with a wide smile.

“Today marks the day my administration takes office, and starts the hard work ahead of us. I expect my administration to uphold the highest legal and ethical standards. I feel a massive responsibility to bridge the gaps in our country and unite us together. Today I’m signing nine executive orders.” I take the one on the top. “The first order is to freeze executive branch government wages. That includes all senior staff, including me.” I open the black folder and sign my name to the paperwork. Once signed, there’s a round of applause. I take the second folder from the top and smile. Opening it

up, I look up to the press corps. “This is an important order for every single American. I’m signing the executive order to raise the minimum wage by two dollars an hour.”

The next hour is spent speaking with the press corps and signing the other executive orders and memos with the reporters as witness.

“Mr. President, how do you feel?” One of the reporters defies Alison’s order not to ask questions.

“Robert,” Alison warns with a stern look and a hard voice.

I give Alison a slight shake of my head. I know she’s protecting me, but I can imagine how they’re feeling. “I’m grateful that I’m signing nine orders that impact each and every American. Mental health affects everyone, as does climate change, racial equality and women’s rights.”

“But—”

“We can reserve the questions for the briefing, folks. Or, alternately, I can entertain you with knock-knock jokes while the President concentrates,” Alison says, taking control back from the reporter. There’s a collective laugh among everyone in the room, including me.

“Thank you, everyone.” Alison ushers the press out of my office once I’ve finished with the executive orders. Liam and Esther both exit through their respective doors.

I look around the empty office, then stand. “You were amazing.” Kathryn wraps her arms around my body and gives me a kiss. “I’m so honored to be part of this.”

“As much as I want us to spend the day together, I really need to get to work.”

“I have work to do too,” Kathryn replies. She kisses me again before breaking away and heading toward the doors that lead out to the garden. Kathryn stops and turns to look at me from over her shoulder. “You know, you’re the sexiest president I’ve ever seen.” She winks at me before walking out and heading back to the residence.

She’s a damn minx.

No quicker do I sit and Liam is back in my office holding a file. “Mr. President, the cabinet is ready to be sworn in tomorrow.”

“We’ve hit the ground running, Liam.”

“That’s been your pledge to the American people from the start, sir.”

“Yes, it has.”

“Mr. President, once the cabinet has been sworn in, we have back-to-back

meetings with each cabinet member.”

“Excellent.”

“Mr. President, could you please sign these?” Esther doesn’t even knock when she walks into my office. She places the papers on my desk and waits for me to sign them.

“Thank you, Liam.” He backs out of my office but leaves the folder he brought in on my desk.

I sign the documents Esther has brought in. She takes them and leaves my office, giving me enough time to open the folder and scan through the appointments for tomorrow.

With my time spent reviewing more policies, I don’t even notice the day slipping away. Before I know it, it’s late in the evening and my eyes are stinging from strain.

I sit back in my chair and take a breath.

What a hell of a first day.

BENNETT

I startle awake and blink several times, trying to get my bearings. I sit up in bed and rub my hands over my eyes. Kathryn mumbles from beside me, which forces a smile to my mouth. She's sleeping on her stomach with her hair messily strewn across the pillow. She inhales loudly, making her snore.

Angling my body toward her, I place my hand on her back. "Where's the cat?" she asks.

Cat? We don't have a cat, or a dog, or any other animal. I lean over and kiss her exposed shoulder. Kathryn exhales loudly, flutters her eyes open and closes them again. "Did you pick the poo up?"

I chuckle and kiss her again. Clearly, she's dreaming about us getting a dog. Perhaps we need to visit the rescue shelter and adopt a dog, or cat. We'll have to talk about this soon. I suck her earlobe into my mouth and nibble on it. "I like that," Kathryn says in a deep, gravelly, sexy voice.

Thankfully she's not talking about animals anymore. "Do you like this?" I ask as I position myself over her body and push my hard cock into her. The absolute joy and convenience of Kathryn sleeping without underwear pleases me. Easy and total access to her body whenever I want it. Her pussy is wet and greedy as she takes me with one fluid push. "I need to fuck you."

"Fuck me hard," she begs.

I lift my upper body up and push down on her head while I use her for my pleasure. Kathryn's moans are all the encouragement I need to keep this rhythm and pace. I grip the back of her neck, applying gentle pressure while closing my eyes to enjoy the feeling of her wet pussy. I know I need to concentrate or I'm going to lose myself in moments. I open my eyes, pull out of her, and flip Kathryn over. "I want you to watch as I fuck you."

Kathryn smirks as she lifts a brow. She rises onto her elbows and lowers her eyes to her spread legs. I grip my cock, line us up, and slowly push into her. Kathryn's breathing escalates as I watch her watching me fuck her. Jesus, she's perfect. Kathryn nibbles on her lower lip while keeping an eye on where we're joined together. "This is hot."

Gripping her ass, I pull her closer to me. I lift her leg over my shoulder, allowing me to slide deeper into her. My body takes over, my hips speed up, and all I want to do is gift her with my cum. She snakes her right hand between us and rubs at her clit. "You're such a dirty girl." I don't give Kathryn a chance to respond as I silence her with my mouth, taking every one of her wanton groans.

Kathryn's muffled moans increase and my own body tenses as I'm about to come. My balls draw up, and I release everything into my beautiful wife. My hips smash against hers, emptying myself into her starved pussy.

Both our bodies slow, and I lower her leg from my shoulder. I pull out of Kathryn and lie back on the bed. "I think you need to do that more often," she says and releases a small chuckle. "Yep, it's decided. You have to wake me that way for sex from now on. With your dick or your tongue in me. Either way is perfectly acceptable to me."

"It is, is it?"

Kathryn pushes off the bed and heads into the bathroom. "Presidential sex is good sex. Knowing my husband comes undone for me is the best feeling in the world."

Ladies and gentlemen, let me introduce you to my incredibly sexy wife who loves to be fucked. I'm such a lucky man. I run my hand over my face, and once Kathryn has returned to bed, I head into the bathroom to clean up.

Returning to the bedroom, I find Kathryn completely out of it, and back asleep. Her mouth is slightly open, and she's lightly snoring. How on earth does she fall asleep so quickly?

I slide on a t-shirt and boxer briefs and open the door to head into the residence kitchen. One of the Secret Service agents is standing by the door. "Good morning," I say, forgetting his name.

"Good morning, Mr. President," he acknowledges in a clear, hard voice.

I walk into the kitchen and open the fridge, searching for some juice. When I find it, I open it and pour myself a big glass.

Today is my second day in office, and I'm already behind with what I have to do. I may as well get ready and head down to the office to get a head

start on the day.

— * —

When I open my office door, Esther is sitting at her desk, working on her laptop. “Can I help you with anything, Mr. President?” Esther asks.

“No, I’m heading down to see Elizabeth.”

“Where are you going?” Liam asks from behind me.

“I feel like wandering the hallways for a little extracurricular activity,” I shoot to Liam from over my shoulder.

He leans into me and whispers, “Are you being a smart-ass?” He’s careful that no one else hears.

“It appears I am.” I run my hand through my hair as I turn to give him a smirk. “What is it?”

“The cabinet is being sworn in at ten.”

“I know,” I say.

“And then you have individual meetings with each cabinet member.”

“Why are you handling this?”

“Because you haven’t hired a personal aide.”

I stop walking and turn to Liam. “A body man? Do I really need one?”

“If you don’t hire a personal aide, then it’s up to Esther and me to keep your diary up to date.”

I look down at the ground and give him a curt nod of acknowledgement. “Okay.”

“Can I ask Esther to get the process started?”

We resume walking toward Elizabeth’s office. “Yeah, you can.”

“Great.” Liam breaks away from me and heads back to his office.

Once I reach Elizabeth’s office, I quickly fill her in on what I need. “Mr. President, I’m also preparing a welcome speech for your meeting with the press corps tomorrow.”

There’s a press corps meeting tomorrow? “Thank you.”

As I walk past the open offices where the interns are, one man catches my attention. He has three law books sitting open on the desk and his head is lowered as he shoots glances between the three. I can’t help but slow down

and take in what he's doing. He hasn't even noticed me hovering close by. There's a pen cap in his mouth, his brows are drawn together, and he's furiously taking notes. I walk over to him and stand beside his desk. He looks up at me, down, then back. Springing to his feet, he nearly spits the pen cap from his mouth. "Mr. President," he says in a tight voice. "Can I help you, sir?" His shoulders are unnaturally stiff as he stares at me with wide eyes.

"What are you so intently working on?" I glance at the three books lying open.

He gulps and looks at the books. "It's on my own time, sir. I'm sorry." He moves to slam the books shut.

"Stop." I lift my hand in gesture. "There's no need to be nervous, I'm only asking what you're working on."

His jaw tightens as he closes his mouth. "Um," he finally starts. "I'm doing some research for school." He again looks to the books. "I'm sorry."

"No need to apologize. What's your name?"

"My name?" His forehead crinkles.

"Yes. Do you have one?"

"My name is Jamie, sir."

"Good. What school are you attending?"

Jamie's breath hitches as he averts his eyes. "A local community college," he barely mutters.

"Fantastic. What are you studying for?"

Jamie quickly lifts his head. I wonder if he thought I was going to scold him for going to a community college? "A Bachelor's Degree in Social Work."

"Impressive," I say as I nod. "And these are helping?"

"Absolutely." The smile on his face is wide with pride.

"Then I want you to continue using them." Jamie's eyes light up as if it's Christmas morning. "On your time." I point at him but give him a small smile.

"Of course, sir."

I'm about to walk away but have another question to ask him. "Why social work, Jamie?"

He hesitates and moves his gaze to the right. "Sir," he starts once he's thought about how he wants to reply. "In my opinion, the welfare of the family is the core of our country."

I lean against the wall in front of the desk and fold my arms. "How so?"

He looks down again, his shoulders slightly turtling in. “Because, sir, without their basic human needs met, how can a person be a productive and healthy member of society? The most elementary needs of people are to connect, and feel safe.”

Hmm. Interesting. In one sentence, Jamie has managed to sum up the fundamental center of our nation. Without a happy, safe, and healthy core of citizens, the country can’t run efficiently. I push off the wall and nod. I glance at his books and offer him a small smile. “Keep working.”

“Yes, sir.”

I turn and head back to my office, only to find Liam pacing back and forth. “We’re late.”

“One of the interns, Jamie. I want him to interview for the position of my aide.”

“Why?”

“I like him.”

“He might not be qualified.”

“He’ll learn,” I counter. I reach for my glasses and slide them into my suit jacket pocket.

Liam moves ahead of me to let Esther know I want Jamie to interview for the position. When I meet them both outside my office, Esther smiles brightly. “You’re getting an aide?” she asks hopefully.

I click my tongue to the roof of my mouth and smirk at her. “I thought I better go easy on you.”

She lifts her brows in defiance. “So you should,” she quips with equal sting in her voice to match mine.

Liam and I head over to swear in the cabinet before our back-to-back meetings begin.

— * —

My neck is stiff and my shoulders are tender to the touch. It’s pushing midnight, and I haven’t had a chance to speak to or see Kathryn other than a moment when I needed to go to the residence.

I pack my laptop up and head upstairs to retire for the evening.

A pleasant aroma of garlic and onions hits me once I'm out of the elevator. I can hear Kathryn humming to music coming from the kitchen. I head straight into our room and place my briefcase on the bed before going to find my wife in the kitchen. I can't help but smile when I see she has her back to me, but she's moving her hips and humming horrifically as she stacks the dishwasher. She breaks out into the lyrics of the song, and I cringe at her terrible singing voice. "You sound..."

Kathryn bolts upright and clasps at her chest. "Shit, Bennett, you scared me."

I walk further into the kitchen, lace my hands through her brown hair, and kiss her with passion. "Why are you up at midnight? You should be sleeping."

"Because you haven't eaten since lunch."

"Who told you?" I narrow my eyes at her. She pretends to zip her lips. "It was Esther, wasn't it?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Anyway, I had a feeling you'd be coming in late, so I've already prepared all the sides, I just need to cook the steak and mushroom sauce and that won't take long."

"Have you eaten?" I ask as I pull out a barstool and sit.

"I ate hours ago. But I know you're stubborn and probably wouldn't have stopped during the day." She places a thick, juicy, steak on a plate and continues preparing the sauce. "Maybe I need to bring you food throughout the day."

"Or, maybe not. What are you going to do, bring me a lunch box? What would the other kids say?" I chuckle.

She pours the mushroom sauce over the steak and brings the plate around to me. Placing the plate in front of me she pulls the stool out to sit beside me. "Maybe I need to add something extra to Esther's chores."

Before I have a chance to cut into my succulent, still-sizzling steak, I whip my head around to look at her. "Don't do that; she already has too much to do. Actually, Liam thinks I should get a personal aide, so, I think I will."

"Yeah? Who?"

"A kid who's interning here. His name is Jamie."

"How did you find him?"

The moment the steak is in my mouth it nearly melts, it's so tender. "I was walking past and saw he had law books out, so I asked him what he was doing. He told me he was doing research for school." I groan with

appreciation as I inhale the steak.

“So, because he was doing research, you’re interested in him?” Kathryn’s voice is filled with surprise.

“I like the way he challenged me.”

“He challenged you?”

“When I asked him why he’s studying social work, he said because the welfare of the family is the core of our country, and I really liked his answer. He didn’t try to give me an answer I wanted to hear. He didn’t sugarcoat his answer. I also like the fact he goes to a community college.”

Kathryn’s lips turn up in a small smile. “If you like him, then I think you need to give him an opportunity to sit with you and see if he’s a fit for the office.”

“I do like him, which is why I told Liam to go ahead and put him on the list.”

Kathryn dips her finger in the sauce and brings it up to her mouth, licking the residue off. “I’ve been thinking. I want to head back to work soon.”

“You do? Wouldn’t you rather stay home and look after your husband?” I wink as I turn on the stool and drag her off hers and into my arms. “I could keep you tied to the bed.”

“You could, but you wouldn’t.”

“I would if you’d let me.” I pepper kisses down the column of her throat. Kathryn snuggles into me further and tilts her head to the side, giving me a better angle to adore her with my mouth.

“As much as I want this to continue I’m really tired, and I need to go to bed.” She breaks away from me and begins to walk out of the kitchen. I can’t help but watch as she walks away, her hips swaying from side to side tempting me with every step she takes. “Before you get any ideas, I’m too tired for any funny business tonight.”

“You calling me fucking you *funny*?” Kathryn makes me so happy.

“Well...” she jokes.

I stand abruptly, knocking the stool over. “You’ve done it now, girl.” Kathryn squeals and takes off out of the kitchen, running away from me.

I pull my shoulders back and casually head out after her. Mark’s now long gone and has been replaced by another member of the Secret Service. He stands stoically against the wall, his arms rigidly at his side. “Evening,” I say as I strut past him toward our bedroom.

“Mr. President,” he greets me in a dark tone with a slight nod.

The moment I'm in our bedroom, I find Kathryn sprawled out on the bed, completely naked. "I thought you were too tired," I say as I unbutton my shirt and shrug out of it.

She turns to eye me and cocks a brow. Smirking, Kathryn nibbles on her lower lip as I finish getting undressed. Her right hand comes up to her breast to pinch her erect nipple. "You've woken me up."

I stand at the foot of the bed and tilt my head to the side while I watch my beautiful wife play with her nipples. "A part of me wants to devour you, though I must admit..." I clear my throat and palm my hardening cock. "I like watching you too."

"Do you?" She sits up in bed, releases her nipple, and seductively trails her hand down to her pussy. She spreads her lips with her fingertips, showing me how perfect she is.

"Finger fuck yourself, baby," I command.

Kathryn scoots her ass closer to me, bringing her knees up so she's completely open and exposed. She impales her greedy pussy with a finger and releases a long moan as her head rolls back. A deep grumble vibrates through my chest, and as I watch Kathryn pleasure herself, I grip my cock. My hand increases in speed, while I selfishly soak in all her inviting noises.

Wild thoughts are buzzing through me, sending me crazy. I push her hand away and devour her pussy, licking and biting while being rewarded with all her wanton groans. Kathryn pushes her fingers through my hair, then tightens her grip. "That's it. Right there," she murmurs in a heavy breath. Her hips rotate on my face as she grinds against me, finding her release on the end of my tongue.

I pull away and wipe my mouth with the back of my hand. I position her legs over my shoulders and in one sweeping movement, my cock is deep inside my wife. Up on my knees, I fuck Kathryn and watch as her tits jiggle from side to side as I continuously ram into her. She closes her eyes and screws her mouth up as she tries to hold on to her release. With my thumb, I rub at her clit while I keep my rhythm going. Kathryn's jaw tightens as she clasps at the bed sheets.

Collapsing on top of her, I kiss her mouth, muffling her sounds of ecstasy. "I love you so much, Bennett," she mumbles.

"I love you." Heat pounds my body, dragging me closer and closer to my own release. With a sharp intake of breath and my balls tensing, I come into my wife. God, I can't wait until she's carrying my baby. She kisses down my

neck, nibbling at my collarbone while she groans with her own release.

Kathryn lowers her legs from my shoulders. “I feel like a pretzel.”

“Lucky you’re bendy.” I kiss her once more on the mouth before pulling out of her. Kathryn pushes on me and heads into the bathroom to clean up. As she reenters the bedroom, I walk in to shower.

She grabs my arm and kisses me with passion. “I’m giving you a heads-up; I love you, but I’m tired and I need to sleep.”

I cup her face and kiss the tip of her nose. “Sleep well.” I watch as she crawls into bed and turns over on her side. She’s naked, which means I’m feasting on her for breakfast. I know she loves waking up with my head between her legs. God only knows, *I* love waking her that way.

KATHRYN

“Hmmm,” I murmur as I dream of Bennett with his tongue inside me. Opening my eyes, my dream becomes a reality. “I really do enjoy waking like this.” I push the sheet off our bodies to find Bennett in his dress pants and a business shirt, with his face between my legs. He looks up and smirks before returning to my pussy. My hips swivel on their own as I push my fingers through his hair and hold his head in place.

The knock on the door startles me. “Fuck,” Bennett grumbles as he pulls away from me. He shakes his head. “I’m sorry.” He stands from the bed and carefully places the sheet over my body.

“That’s okay, I can finish off on my own.”

He takes a step away from the bed and arches a brow. “Don’t you fucking dare! Give me one minute.”

“In one minute, I’ll have come.” I snake my hand under the sheet, making sure he notices the movement while I plow a finger into my wet pussy.

Bennett lifts his hand and points at me. “I said stop. I’m finishing you off.”

“Not if I get to it first.”

Walking backward, he lowers his chin and scowls at me. He slightly opens the door, making sure to keep his body as a barrier so whoever is at the door can’t see in. Unnecessary if you ask me, considering the bed isn’t visible from the door. Even though I can’t hear what they’re saying, I know Liam is speaking with Bennett. The door closes again, and I roll over to look at my sexy husband. He looks down at the floor and runs his hand through his hair. “I have to go.”

“It’s okay, you can go. Like I said, I can finish without you.”

His jaw tenses as he stares over at the door as if he's weighing up his options. "I mean, it could wait for a few moments."

"Nope, you have a job to do. Off you go." I lift my hand from under the covers and flick it at him. "Shoo. The moment has passed, and I no longer want your face in my crotch."

Bennett smirks and shakes his head. "I owe you a tongue fucking."

"Maybe tonight, if I'm awake."

He walks into the bathroom, where I hear the water running as he washes his face and brushes his teeth. Bennett strides into the bedroom and takes his suit jacket from the back of the wing-backed armchair, shrugging it on. He stops before leaving and turns toward me. Staring at me, he smiles. "Every time I inhale, all I'll be able to remember is the delicious smell of your cunt." He opens the door and exits, leaving me gasping with his dirty words.

"Fiend," I chuckle as I lie back on the bed and smile. My husband, the sex fiend.

— * —

"Good morning, Grayson," I say once I'm dressed and ready for the day.

"Morning, ma'am." He tips his head in acknowledgement.

"Care to join me for a coffee?"

"No thank you, ma'am."

"Can you call me Kathryn, please?"

"I'm sorry, but no, ma'am, I can't."

I walk toward the kitchen to make myself a coffee and something for breakfast. Grayson follows me. "Well, at least can you not call me ma'am all the time?"

"I can do that." He smiles as he watches me prepare a coffee.

"Tell me a little about yourself." Grayson stands rigid, pulling his shoulders back. I think he may be uncomfortable sharing his details. "I mean, you don't have to, obviously, it's just I take it you and I are going to be together for at least the next four years. It would be nice to know a little more than only your name."

"What would you like to know?"

“Is there a Mrs. Grayson, or even a Mr. Grayson?”

“No, ma’am. I’m not looking for any type of relationship.”

I prepare my coffee, then turn to look at him. “Are you disappointed you’re not guarding the president?”

His posture changes to a more pronounced stance, his chest pushes out and he lifts his chin. “I *am* on PPD,” he says while staring at me with a quizzical expression.

“PPD?”

“Presidential Protection Duty. You’re an integral part of President Adams’s administration, ma’am. You’re his family, and that in itself is an honor for me.”

I sip my coffee as I stare at Grayson. I’m instantly more at ease with him. I like him, quite a lot. “Thank you, Grayson.” It’s a bit weird though, because Grayson would take a bullet for me even though I’m not running the country.

“You’re welcome.”

I tip out the rest of my coffee and lean against the kitchen counter. “Is my husband in the Oval Office?”

Grayson lifts his hand and speaks through his comm wrist piece. He waits a moment and says, “Yes, ma’am, he is.”

“Great.” I move past him and feel his presence close behind as I head to the elevator. Once on the ground level, I walk toward Bennett’s office. It’s still so surreal to have so many Secret Service agents everywhere. Wherever I go, there’s a Secret Service agent. They’re so prominent that it can be a little overwhelming and intimidating. As I approach Bennett’s office, another agent opens the door for me. Bennett looks over his shoulder at me from above his glasses. His entire face lights up with happiness when he sees me. Pushing to his feet, he walks over and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “Hey, what are you doing here?”

“I thought I’d come see my husband before I head out.”

“Where are you off to?” He sits in his seat, and I lean against his desk.

“I received an email from the Smithsonian asking if I’d like to donate anything to their First Lady collection. So, I’m donating my inauguration gown. They sure work fast. I thought the request wouldn’t come for a few weeks, but as it turns out, they were quick and emailed me yesterday. So, I replied and asked if today would be convenient.”

“Wow, that’s very fast. Does Grayson know?”

“I filled him in yesterday, and they’ve done whatever they have to do.”

“Okay, that’s good.”

“I’ve also been thinking about working, or volunteering somewhere. The campaign work is finished for now, and I can’t sit around doing nothing all the time.”

“We touched on this yesterday. What do you want to do?”

The door opens, and Liam stops when he sees me. “Mrs. Adams, I’m sorry, I didn’t know you were here.”

“Liam, please, it’s Kathryn.”

He smirks and nods once. “I can come back.”

“Is it urgent?” Bennett asks.

Liam darts his eyes to me and shakes his head. “It can wait.”

“I promise you can have him in five minutes.” I hold my hand up showing him all five fingers extended.

“Perfect.” He smiles and closes the door.

“So, what are you thinking about?” Bennett picks up the conversation easily.

“I’m considering either asking the Smithsonian if I can volunteer there or...” I look down at my wringing hands. “Working with teenage homeless kids. What do you think?”

“Well...” He runs his hand through his hair, rustling it up a bit. “I think you have to do what makes you happy. If you want to volunteer, then do it. You studied to be a librarian. Maybe you could work at the Library of Congress.”

I scrunch up my nose. “I don’t want to work there.”

“Then volunteer, if that’s what you want to do.”

I purse my lips as I stare at Bennett. “I don’t know. I’ll speak with the Smithsonian, and see if they’d like me to volunteer for them.” I lift one shoulder in a half shrug. “We’ll see, I guess.”

“You know what you do need to do?”

“What?”

“You need to organize a staff. A personal assistant to start with.” I roll my eyes and huff. “Don’t you roll your eyes at me, Mrs. Adams.”

“Why do I need a personal assistant? I’ve never had one before, why do I need one now?”

“Because this is only the beginning, and you’re going to have too much to do on your own. Oh, speaking of which, I need you to organize a state dinner for the Austrian president and his wife.”

“Austria? Why?”

“Because I reached out to him and invited him for an informal meeting.”

“But a state dinner isn’t informal.”

“I want the country and the world to know I’m serious about taking steps to make America safer and more appealing for everyone. And this is how I start, by interacting with countries that are at the top of the safest places to live in the world. Austria is consistently up there, and I want to learn from other countries.”

“I like that. Baby steps.”

“Exactly.” He nods and looks at the watch I gave him.

I push up off the desk and step backward. “I know, I know, Liam will be in here in the next few seconds. Besides, I’m running late. Luckily, Esther was kind enough to send the dress out to be dry-cleaned for me.”

“I heard my name,” Esther says as she walks into the office holding a stack of papers. “Mr. President, these need your signature please. Mrs. Adams, how are you today?”

“I said you were kind enough to send my dress out to be dry-cleaned.”

“I did, ma’am, and it’s been returned. I have it at my desk. I was going to bring it up to you, but seeing as you’re here.” She quickly exits the office and returns with a white box.

“Thank you so much for doing this.”

“You’re welcome.” Esther has always conveyed a genuinely warm motherly love toward everyone she meets. From the beginning, we knew she was going to be important to us.

I take the box and place it on Bennett’s desk before giving Esther a tight hug. “Okay, I need to go. So, I’ll see you tonight?”

Liam enters the office from the other door and quickly scans the room. “No one told me we were having a party,” he jokes.

“I’m about to leave,” I say as I pick the box up and walk around to give Bennett a quick kiss.

“And I’m here to have those signed.” Esther points to the stack of papers.

“Thank you again, Esther.” Taking the box, I head out of the office to find Grayson.

It takes a few moments to get to the underground garage and into the car. Once out on the grounds, I sit back and watch as I’m driven toward the Smithsonian for my meeting. The drive is short, and when we arrive, there’s a team of people from the Smithsonian ready for me. “Mrs. Adams, thank

you so much for coming out today.”

“You must be Bridget?” I hold my hand out to shake hers.

“Yes, ma’am, I am. I’m so honored that you responded as quickly as you did to donate your dress.”

“Of course, it’s in the car.” I turn to point to the back seat.

Bridget looks at one of the ladies beside her, who steps toward the car. However, one of the other Secret Service agents stops her, retrieves the box, and hands it to her. “It’s such a beautiful dress, and we’re grateful for your generosity.”

We begin walking toward a staff entrance, where she uses a pass to let us all in. The Secret Service agents surround us, though still giving us privacy and space. “I’d love to see where the dress will be showcased.”

“Of course. There’s a process to getting the dress ready, but I can certainly take you through the exhibit if you like.”

The next hour is spent with the women from the Smithsonian who spend their time curating the pieces that First Ladies donate to them.

“Ma’am,” Grayson whispers, encouraging me to wrap up what we’re doing here.

“Thank you so much for showing me the exhibit, and I do hope to be able to come back and see the display the next time it’s open.”

“The First Ladies exhibit will open at the beginning of next month. We’d be honored to give you a private showing before the doors open for the public,” Bridget says happily.

“Thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

We quickly wrap things up, then head back to the White House. I notice a store with newspaper taped across the front window and a sign writer’s finishing a business name. I chuckle at the name. Books, Books, and Coffee. I giggle at the simplicity, no need to guess what they’ll be selling there. I make a mental note to go back to the store once it’s open and have a look at the book selection.

When we return to the underground parking, Grayson gets out and opens the door for me. The ride up to the residence is fast, with only Grayson in the elevator with me. “Ma’am,” he says once we’re upstairs.

“What is it Grayson?”

“As Secret Service agents, our hands must always be kept empty.” I tilt my head to the side, not really understanding where this is coming from. “One of my team had to take the box out of the car.”

I lower my eyes and stare off to the side, trying to figure out what he's going on about. It quickly dawns on me that he meant today at the Smithsonian. "Oh," I pause for a moment. "I'll be hiring a personal assistant soon to help me so you won't be put in that position again."

"Thank you, ma'am." He steps away, returning to his spot between the kitchen and the elevator.

I walk into the bedroom and toe off my shoes before collapsing on the bed. I guess, I better find myself a personal assistant so I don't compromise the Secret Service and the work they do.

But for now, I'm tired and I'm going to have a nap. This whole election thing has really taken its toll on my body. It's all catching up to me. I think I could sleep for a week, and I still won't have caught up.

BENNETT

I'm up, dressed, and down in my office by five in the morning. There's so much to do today if I want to keep my date with Kathryn for the ballet tonight. Ballet isn't something I'm particularly fond of, but Kathryn has always loved Swan Lake. So whenever it's possible, I always make sure to have seats for it.

With my laptop open, I'm lost in my work when I hear Esther say, "You're here early, Mr. President."

"Good morning, Esther." I look at the time on my laptop. "I could say the same thing about you too. The clock has just ticked over to six."

"I'm an early riser, sir. You should know that by now. No use in sleeping when there's a whole day waiting for us." She places another stack of papers down on the desk. "Can I get you a coffee?"

"That would be terrific, thank you."

She leaves the papers on my desk and returns to her office. The moment the door is closed, the other door to my left opens. "Good morning, Mr. President."

"Good morning, Liam." He walks over and stands in front of the desk. "Do we have a meeting this morning?"

"We do, but not until ten. We're meeting with the Secretary of Homeland Security. Until then, you have all the candidates for your personal aide."

"Did that kid make the cut? The intern?" I glance up from above my glasses before returning my attention to my laptop.

"Jamie? Yes, he did."

"Good, am I seeing him today?"

"He's on the list. He was hesitant though."

I abandon my work for a few moments and sit back in my chair. “Why?” I cross my arms in front of my chest.

“Because he has an exam at nine, and his interview with you is at nine,” Liam pauses and lifts his brows.

“So it’s either me or an exam?” Liam nods. “And he was hesitant about that?” Liam nods again. “What time is my first interview?”

“Seven.”

“Why didn’t you schedule him at seven so he has time to make his exam?”

“He was last minute, Mr. President. I had to squeeze him in.”

I tap my fingers on the desk and stare at Liam. “Call the seven-thirty interview and change him to nine, then call Jamie and tell him I’ll see him at seven-thirty.”

“Mr. President—”

Liam is about to argue, but I lift my hand to stop him. “College is important and I’m not going to stand in his way. Swap them around.”

Liam takes a step back and nods. “Yes, sir.”

Liam leaves and I return to my work.

— * —

“Mr. President, Garry Smith for you,” Esther announces. *Who?* That’s right, my seven-fifteen. I lift my hand and gesture for her to show him in. “The President will see you now,” Esther says.

“Garry, thank you for coming in.” I gesture for him to sit opposite me.

“Thank you, Mr. President.” A man who appears to be my age, dressed in a suit, sits opposite me. I open the folder on him that Liam handed me before the interviews began. “You were a Marine?” I scan his folder and find it quite impressive.

“Yes, sir,” he says as he fidgets in the seat.

He seems uneasy being in here. “What do you think about gay marriage?”

There’s a tiny tremor beneath his right eye. “I’m fine with it.” His words don’t match his response.

“What about gay couples adopting?” In the exact same spot, there’s

another small quiver.

“It’s up to them.”

I don’t believe him, and if he’s going to be my personal aide, then he’s going to be with me nearly every single day for the next four years. I close his folder and place it on my desk. Standing, I hold my hand out to him. “Thank you for your time.”

“Oh, um.” Garry gives me a slight headshake and frowns. “Thank you, sir.” He finally shakes my hand before seeing himself out.

Esther looks over from her desk, stands, and heads into my office. She approaches my desk and takes Garry’s file. “Talk about lightning speed. That bad?”

“I can’t trust him. He lied to me.”

“He was in here for all of sixty seconds.”

“Enough time for me to see that I can’t trust him. He’d tell me what I want to hear, as opposed to the truth. And I can’t trust someone who lies so easily.”

“How do you know he lied? He may have been overwhelmed by your presence.” I look up at her from above my glasses, giving her a knowing stare. “Yeah, you’re right.” She looks out toward her office, then says, “Your next appointment is here. Jamie—”

He’s the one I’ve been looking forward to the most. “Good, send him in,” I say, cutting her off.

“Yes, sir.” She walks out of my office with Garry Smith’s file. “The President will see you now,” she announces to Jamie.

Nervously, he walks in, wearing the same cheap suit he was wearing the day I met him. “Jamie, I’m pleased you could make the appointment today.”

“Mr. President, I have to be honest and say I’m out of my league. I don’t think I’d be able to be your personal aide.”

“Why?” I indicate for him to sit in the seat Garry what’s-his-name was in.

“Sir, with all due respect, I’m not at the level required to be able to successfully do this job. It’s intense, and...and...” He gulps and shakes his head. “I go to a community college, sir,” he argues, as if something like that makes him a lesser person.

“Then why did you come to the interview? Why didn’t you say you weren’t interested?”

“Liam is quite coercive, sir.” He darts his eyes around the room, as if he’s expecting Liam to charge in here and scold him for his words.

“You don’t want the job, or you don’t think you’re good enough?”

“I think other people may be better suited to it than I am.”

I sit back in my seat and remove my glasses, laying them on my desk. “Tell me what you think the number one problem we’re facing at the moment is.”

“Sir, I’m not a politician. I’m not entirely sure how you expect me to reply.”

“I want an answer. Give me whatever you think is the greatest problem we’re facing as a nation.”

He thins his lips as his jaw flexes. “Um.” *Not a good start, Jamie. Give me something to work with.* He clears his throat before finally responding with, “We’re not happy.”

Not what I was expecting. “We’re not happy?”

“People are chasing the wrong things. They think if they can make another dollar, their life will be better. And maybe it would be, but if they’re not happy then...” He shakes his head and looks down at his hands before lifting his chin. “It doesn’t matter how much money they make; they’ll never be happy. Happiness is about so much more than money. It’s certainly part of it, but it’s so much more than that.”

“What if I told you you’re wrong?”

“In your eyes I might be wrong, but I know being happy is what’s right for me.”

“You’d rather be homeless and happy than angry and rich?”

“Why can’t we be happy *and* rich? Why do we need to be one or the other? But happiness comes first. I honestly believe if we supported families and made it less stressful for them, then maybe more people could achieve happiness.”

“Interesting.” I smile at Jamie.

“Are you mocking me, sir?”

Fuck, I really like him. “What do you think about gay marriage?” I’m pushing him now, because I want to see if he’s truthful with his responses.

“I think love is love, and who am I to judge someone for who they love? As long as it’s sane, and consensual, then it’s not my business who someone wants to lie beside.”

I’m a fairly good judge of character, and I know he’s being honest. His conviction is refreshing. “What if that gay couple wants a child?”

“Great, because a child who may have had an unfortunate life now has

the chance they deserve to be loved.”

I really like him, but I want to push him to see how he handles whatever may come his way. “I think gay people are an abomination, and they shouldn’t have the rights we do.”

“By *we* you mean, you?” He slightly tilts his head to the side.

“Are you gay?”

“Does it matter what I am?”

“Gay people don’t deserve to have equal rights.”

“I mean no disrespect, Mr. President, but that’s an archaic way of thinking. In today’s society, to think like that can be quite dangerous, especially for the leader of the free world. Because if you think about it, how free can the world be if the person everyone looks to is so narrow-minded? Love is love, sir.” He rubs his hands down his pants and lowers his chin for a split second. “I’m not the right man for this job, sir. I couldn’t serve at the pleasure of my president knowing he’s so…” He gulps long enough to regain his thoughts. “This position isn’t for me, and if you want me to resign from my internship, I’ll understand. This isn’t the presidency I signed up for.”

There’s a knock on the glass door from behind, and I look over my shoulder to see Kathryn waiting for me. She opens the door and walks into my office. “Hello,” she says to Jamie.

“Mrs. Adams, how are you?” Jamie asks as he stands and extends his hand to her.

Kathryn looks to me, then to Jamie, then back to me. “Should I come back?” she asks.

“Actually, now’s a perfect time. I’m about to offer Jamie the job as my personal aide.”

“What?” Jamie asks, his voice slightly elevated.

“What?” Kathryn echoes at the same time. “You’re the intern?” She looks over to Jamie.

Jamie runs his hand through his hair while his brows knit together in confusion. “I’m not—”

“I asked you those questions because I wanted to see how you’d respond.” His forehead crinkles and his mouth opens slightly. I look to Kathryn and see her smiling. “I like you, and I want you to work for me.”

“But…” He stops talking and flexes his jaw while still staring at me. “It was a test,” he says when he figures it out.

“We have a lot of things to do in this administration, Jamie, and I need

someone I know I can trust. I don't want someone to agree with everything I say when they don't believe in the same thing. I want you to work for me, but there's got to be an understanding."

"Which is what?"

"You don't drop school." His blank expression pushes me to clarify. "College is important, and I'm in office for four years, maybe eight if we're lucky. I don't want you leaving school for this job, and when you need the time for exams, then you'll tell me and you'll take the time to study for them."

Jamie glances between Kathryn and me several times. "I can do that, sir."

"Good, you start tomorrow. Unless you have any more exams?"

"No, after today I'm done for a while."

"Perfect." I hit the intercom on my phone and call for Esther. She's in my office in a few seconds. "Cancel the rest of my interviews, and set Jamie up out there with you. Also, make sure he's ready to go for tomorrow."

Jamie's knee bounces, but he jumps to his feet and extends his hand to me. "Thank you, sir." He then reaches for Kathryn's hand. "Mrs. Adams."

"Come on, Jamie, we've got work to do." Esther encourages him to follow her. They exit my office and close the door behind them.

"So, you did it. You actually hired a personal aide. Good for you." I wrap Kathryn in my arms and give her a small kiss on the cheek. "Maybe I should take a leaf out of your book, and hire myself a personal assistant too."

"You have to. You can't do everything by yourself."

She rolls her eyes and slightly huffs. "It's so pompous though."

"No, it's not. You're the First Lady, and there's a lot of things you have to do. Besides, I got the report from the Secret Service about your visit to the Smithsonian yesterday."

"Ugh, Grayson already spoke to me about that. I feel like I'm in trouble."

"You're not, but they have a job to do, and they can't be carrying anything for you."

"I know." She pulls away from my hug and walks over to sit on the sofa in my office. "I told Grayson I'd be hiring a personal assistant, but..." She screws her nose up and huffs. "Honestly, I don't think I need one."

"You do, because this is only the start, and if you're going to be working or volunteering, then you'll fall behind on your official duties. Or worse still, you'll be exhausted and you'll run yourself into the ground."

"Speaking of which, I woke this morning feeling like I might be coming

down with something. I feel kind of lethargic, and like I don't want to do anything."

"Then don't. Do you have any commitments today?"

"Only to head to the Office of the First Lady in the East Wing to get the process started on hiring a personal assistant."

"Go, speak with them, and maybe go and spend the rest of the day up at the residence. Or, call your mom and see if she wants to come for lunch. Take it easy for the next few days. I have a lot of meetings happening over the next week or so, meaning I really can't help too much."

She flicks her hand at me. "I don't need my husband to hold my hand through anything."

The door between Liam's office and mine opens. "Oh, I'm sorry," Liam says. "Sir, we have a situation." He darts his eyes to Kathryn and smiles. "Mrs. Adams, how are you?"

Kathryn stands and walks over to Liam, giving him a small kiss on the cheek. "A lot better now Bennett has hired a personal aide."

Liam glances at Bennett. "You did? Who? Is it the kid?"

"It is. He's starting tomorrow."

"Good for you." He clears his throat and looks to Kathryn again. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Adams."

She flicks her hand at him. "I've got to go anyway. Bye. See you tonight?" Kathryn kisses me chastely on the mouth as she waits for my reply.

"You sure will." She walks out of my office, leaving Liam and me alone. "What's going on?"

"A train has derailed on the outskirts of New York City."

Suddenly there's tightness across the top of my eyebrows. I rub at the tension and nod once. "How many people injured and killed?"

"Over a hundred injured, because it happened at peak rush hour. But thankfully, there have been no lives lost."

"How did this happen?" I hold my hand up to stop him. "Get the secretary of transportation in here."

"He's on his way."

I walk over to Esther's office and open the door. "Get me the mayor of New York on the phone."

"Yes, sir." She picks up the phone and immediately begins to dial.

I turn to Liam. "Should I be calling in the secretary of defense?" I cock a brow. "Is it terrorism?"

“No, I spoke with the mayor, and he assured me it isn’t.”

“Then how the fuck does a train derail?”

“Mr. President, the mayor on line one for you,” Esther chimes in through the intercom.

“Tony, what’s happening with the train?”

“Mr. President, this was a horrible accident that occurred due to multiple errors. There were broken rails, but there was also an obstruction on the lines and we believe the train’s engineer was speeding.”

I shake my head as I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I’ll send you aid to help clean this up.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Hanging up, I look to Liam. “I’m on it,” he says and begins to leave.

“Keep me informed.”

“Will do.”

I walk over to sit at my desk to continue with my work.

Esther returns to my office, holding a coffee. “I figure you might need this.”

“You figured right.” She places it beside me, and I concentrate on everything I need to do today.

What a day—and it’s only eight in the morning.

KATHRYN

“The ballet last night was something else,” I say to Bennett as I watch him dress for the day from the comfort of our bed. My man is sexy, especially when he’s wearing a three-piece suit. He looks damn fine when wearing any suit, but in a three-piece, *whoa*, sexy as fuck.

“Are you gawking at me?” He adjusts his cuff links as he smirks.

“Sure am,” I shamelessly admit.

“Keep looking at me the way you are, and I’ll have to have my way with you before I leave for work.” A small groan bubbles in the pit of my stomach. Nudging the bed sheets off my body, I let my legs fall open, quietly inviting my husband. Bennett pauses, then slowly turns his head to look at me. “What are you doing to me?” he asks, his voice husky with a salacious rasp.

“I mean, you don’t have to.” I snake my hand between my legs, push the edge of my panties to the side, and insert a finger. “I’m more than capable of taking care of myself.” I close my eyes and purse my lips together as I enjoy the feel of having my pussy full.

I don’t dare open my eyes when I hear him unzipping his pants. Nor do I say anything when he smacks my hand away. His cock is already hard when he forcefully enters me. Bennett grabs me around the hips, moving me so I’m positioned the way he wants me. “Open your eyes,” he commands.

There’s something so sexy about him when he demands my attention. I open my eyes to watch him fucking me. The vein running down the column of his throat pops as his fingers tighten around my raised hips. He’s using me, about to lose himself in only a few more pumps of his pelvis. It’s in moments like this that I know he’s in his own world, and I’m completely aware he’s using me for his own release. I love being able to do this for my husband.

Bennett's eyes flutter open and his jaw clenches with a grunt as he comes undone around me. The moment he's finished, he opens his eyes fully and heavily sighs. He knows I didn't come. He collapses on top of me and kisses my mouth. "I love you," I whisper, trying to get him out of his head.

"You didn't come."

"No, I didn't. But I wanted you to."

He pulls out of me and walks into the bathroom to clean up. I stand and wait for him to return so I can head into the bathroom. He walks out, and as I walk past him, he grabs my upper arm, bringing me back to him. He smashes his mouth to mine, lacing his fingers through my hair at the base of my neck. "Tonight, I'm going to eat this pussy." He pushes a finger into me and applies pressure to my clit, making me suck in a deep breath. "I'm hungry for it, but it'll have to wait until tonight." He drives his thumb harder on my clit, and a delicious ache pulses through me. I want more, and I want it now. "I have to go." Bennett takes a step back, lifts his hand, and licks at his finger. "Fuck, you taste like my last meal."

All I want to do is ride his face right now, but I know he has to go. I turn to head into the bathroom and call over my shoulder, "Maybe I'll wait for you tonight, or maybe I'll have fun on my own."

I don't hear him charge up behind me, but he grabs my hips, and pushes me against the wall near the bathroom. His front is to my back. Bennett rolls his hips into my ass, pressing his hardening cock into me. He bites on my earlobe, then whispers, "You'll wait."

"Will I?" I challenge.

"You'll wait because you want me to tongue fuck you tonight." He kisses me on the cheek and pulls away. "Now, be a good girl and do what you're told." The door closes behind him as he leaves me wanting more.

"Bastard," I whisper with a massive grin. I head into the bathroom to get ready for my day. Although now, all I'm going to think about is having him between my legs. "Bastard," I repeat with the same goofy smirk.

— * —

Jamie stands when he sees me. "Mrs. Adams, how are you?"

“I’m good, Jamie, how are you? Settling in okay?”

“Um.” He sits again and looks at his desk opposite Esther’s.

“He’s hit the ground running,” Esther pipes in, “and he’s already a super star.”

“She’s being too kind,” Jamie replies as his cheeks turn slightly pink. “There’s a lot to do.”

“Does my husband have any time for lunch today?” I ask Jamie.

He looks to his laptop and types on the keyboard. “He has a twenty-minute gap in an hour and thirty minutes.”

“Can that twenty-minute gap be pushed out to thirty minutes?” Jamie’s brows draw in together as he looks at the schedule. “If it can’t be done, then that’s fine.”

“Um.” Jamie looks to Esther for guidance. Poor kid, he’s been thrown in the deep end and is still trying to get a feel for the land.

“The vice president is running late, so that should be fine,” Esther responds to Jamie’s skepticism.

“Great. Block out that half hour with me, please.”

“Will do, ma’am,” Jamie replies.

I turn to Esther and offer her a smile in kind and mouth, *Thank you*. She gives me a short nod with a small smile as I leave the office.

— * —

As I walk toward the dining hall, Alison looks at me. “Mrs. Adams, what are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to talk to the chef about lunch for Bennett.”

She crinkles her forehead and looks around. Alison steps forward and whispers, “Ma’am, Esther or Jamie can take care of his lunch.”

I touch her upper arm and smile. “I know, but I’m taking my husband to lunch.”

Alison exhales a relieved sigh. “How wonderful.”

“How are you finding the role of press secretary?” I ask, moving the conversation along.

“It’s challenging. But I respect the press corps, and I think they respect

me. Or, at least they've gone easy on me so far and the talons will come out after our first week in the White House."

"Mrs. Adams." One of the chefs leaves from behind the counter to walk over to me. "May I help you, ma'am?" she asks.

"There are other people ahead of me."

The chef looks around and gives me a tight smile. I actually haven't been introduced to the cooking staff yet. She clears her throat and shifts on the spot. "Ma'am, you have priority," she says.

"I can wait. Other people are ahead of me. Perhaps I should come and introduce myself to the kitchen staff." I look to her and extend my hand. "I'm sorry, but I don't know your name."

"Celeste, ma'am. We'd love to give you a tour of the kitchen." The eagerness in her eyes tells me she's ecstatic and maybe has even been looking forward to this.

"Would it be okay if I come back there now, or would you prefer we arrange a time when you're not so busy?"

"Any time convenient to you."

I look to Alison who smiles widely. Being the First Lady certainly takes some getting used to. I have everything available to me at any time I want it, and that's a bit weird. But, I guess, this is what Bennett and I have signed up for. "Then I'd love a tour, Celeste. Thank you."

"It would be our honor."

Celeste turns to walk away, and I follow behind her. Grayson is only steps away at my side. He's stealthy, and sometimes I forget he's near. "I don't know if you're aware, but the White House has three kitchens. There's this one, and down toward the back there is a pastry kitchen. And, there's also the kitchen in the residence. We can accommodate up to one hundred and four dinners, and over a thousand hors d'oeuvres." She shows me around the kitchen, and I can't help but notice how efficiently the kitchen is running with so many chefs in here. "This is Chef Louise, she's the head chef of the kitchen."

"Ma'am, it's a pleasure to meet you," Louise says as she extends her hand.

"The pleasure is mine, Chef Louise." The kitchen is flowing and humming. Chefs are calling out to one another, and it seems to be absolutely flawless.

"Is there anything I can help you with?"

“Actually, yes, would it be too much to ask for you to prepare a picnic basket for me?”

“Of course. When do you require it?”

I smile sweetly, knowing I’m going to ask something that’ll put her behind. “Now?”

“Absolutely,” she says without missing a beat. “I have yet to receive your and the president’s food preferences.”

“Anything that’s in season, Bennett does like his steaks, but I try to give him extra vegetables,” I add with a smile.

“Of course. What would you like in your picnic basket? Perhaps a selection of grazing cheeses, cold meats, some freshly baked bread?”

“Could you add some seasonal fruit, too please?”

“I can. It’ll take me about ten minutes to put something together for you, is that acceptable?”

I can only imagine the amount of pressure I’ve put her under. “I’m grateful you can do this for me. And, I promise, I won’t ever ask for you to do something on such short notice again.”

“Please, it’s my honor.”

“Would you like me to wait outside?”

“Where ever you’re more comfortable.”

I look around the bustling kitchen, and I don’t want to be in the way of anyone so I head out and stand to the side. So many people are saying hello to me as they pass by. My voice dips as I acknowledge each and every person who speaks to me, because I’m finding the excessive attention somewhat intimidating. I’m not waiting long before Louise walks out holding a picnic basket for me. “You found a picnic basket?” I ask as I take it from her hands.

“Ma’am, we’re well stocked here for anything.” She smiles. “I hope this is what you want.”

“It’s wonderful. Thank you so much for putting this together with no notice.”

Louise beams with happiness. Her wide smile warms my heart. Although, I’ll be sure to give her more notice next time. “I’ll return the basket once we’re done.”

“If you leave it with Esther or Jamie, they can return it.”

Jamie’s been here all of a few hours, and everyone already knows his name and what he does for Bennett. “Thank you.” I offer Louise one more smile before leaving the kitchens and heading back to the Oval Office. I look

over my shoulder to see Grayson is behind me. This will certainly take some time to get used to. Jamie looks up from his computer and stands when he sees me walk in with the picnic basket. "Is there anyone in there with him?" I rest the basket on Jamie's desk.

"No, ma'am, he's all yours."

Taking the picnic basket, I open the door to the office and walk in. Bennett lifts his head from the work he's doing and peers over his glasses at me. He sits back in his chair, takes his glasses off, links his fingers, and rests his hands in his lap. "What's this?"

"We're having a picnic," I say as I walk over to his desk.

"We are?"

"Yep. I've cleared your schedule for the next half an hour, so you and I are going out there and having a picnic."

"I have a lot of work to do, darling."

"You'll have a lot of work to do for the next four to eight years. You can take half an hour and have a picnic with your wife," I say with unyielding determination.

"Well, seeing as you asked so nicely, how can I refuse?" He stands and stretches his arms up over his head. "It'll be good to get me out from behind this desk." Bennett reaches for the picnic basket. "Where are we going?"

"The South Lawn. One of the former First Ladies started a vegetable garden there, and I thought we could spend the next half an hour enjoying the sun and each other."

"It's January twenty-fifth, and it snowed last night."

"You have a coat," I say as I eye his suit jacket. "Besides, we're not sitting on the ground."

"It's forty degrees, Kathryn."

"Stop being a baby. Yes, it's cold, but look, the sun is shining and it's absolutely magical out there. We're not going to be out for long, so come on." I tilt my head to the side and flutter my eyes at him in an attempt to get my way.

"Ugh," he grumbles as he removes his suit jacket and walks over to put his coat on. "Here." He takes his scarf off the coat rack, then walks over and places it around my neck. "You have this." Bennett kisses the tip of my nose. "I don't want you getting sick."

"Such a gentleman," I tease.

Bennett links his fingers with mine. "Better believe it," he quips with a

smirk. Holding the picnic basket, we walk toward the patio doors, where one of the Secret Service agents opens the door for us. When we reach the South Lawn, a table has already been prepared, thanks to Esther, who rallied the team for me. “Are you sure you want to sit out here? It’s cold!” Bennett asks with a healthy dose of skepticism.

“It’s a little cold weather. Don’t tell me the president of the United States is whining about it?” I take the basket from his hand and place it on the table. I look over to him and can’t help but notice the cheeky smirk. “What?”

“Keep teasing me, and I’ll have to fuck that right out of your mouth.”

I roll my eyes and slightly shake my head. “Want me on my knees right here for everyone to see?” I slowly unpack the beautiful picnic Louise prepared for us.

“I want you on your knees with your mouth open for me *all* the time.”

My hands still as I slowly raise my chin and stare at Bennett. “Well, if that’s the case, then why are we out here? We should be back at the residence.”

“If only we had the time. Hmm.” He taps his finger to his scruffy chin. “I’ll be sure to inform Jamie to block an hour out of my schedule every day.”

My brows lift as I stare at Bennett with wide eyes. “I have to make an appointment with you to get laid? Wow, how romantic,” I scoff sarcastically.

Bennett chuckles and reaches out to grab me around the waist, bringing me down on his lap. He pushes his fingers into the base of my neck and pulls me into him. His mouth is on mine. His tongue dances passionately with mine. Pulling back, he angles his head up to lay a gentle kiss on my forehead. “I can touch the sky with you by my side.”

I try to hide my smile, but I can’t. “Alright, you *can* be romantic,” I concede. “Sometimes.”

Bennett reaches across to one of the cherry tomatoes, picks it up, and brings it to my lips. “Let me feed you,” he says, laying it on thick.

“Oh man, you’re scoring major points here, mister.” I open my mouth and let him slide the tomato in.

Sly bastard pushes his thumb into my mouth with the tomato. I flick my tongue along the top, making sure to keep eye contact with him. He clears his throat as he slides his thumb out from between my lips. Adjusting the tie around his neck, he smiles and glances around. “Well,” he says, his voice cracking with desire. “I um...” He gulps and smiles wider. “I enjoyed that.”

I lean forward and place my forehead against his. “I thought you would.

Now, have something to eat, because I only have you for a short time.” I stand to move off him and sit in my own chair beside Bennett. As we’re eating, Bennett is watching me. “You’re staring.”

“You look tired. Are you okay?”

“I think everything is catching up with me, that’s all. I’ll be okay.” I shrug as I nibble on the amazing food prepared by Louise. “Maybe I’ll see the doctor. I could be iron deficient. Remember, that happened to me when we started on the campaign trail, and I ended up needing iron supplements. It’s most likely something like that.”

“Don’t let it go on too long. Get yourself looked at soon.”

“Yes, sir,” I say with sass. “Anyway, day five in office.” I look over to him, hoping he can give me an indication on how he’s finding his new job as president of the United States.

He inhales deeply and shakes his head. “I knew coming into this that things move at lightning speed, but I wasn’t expecting things to move *this* fast. It feels like we’re moving at the speed of light. It’s surreal, yet so amazing.” He takes another calming breath and runs his hand through his hair. “Nothing stands still; everything is roaring full speed ahead,” he speaks with such respect and amazement. There’s no doubt in my mind that he was born to be the president.

“Mr. President, Mrs. Adams, I’m sorry to bother you,” Liam interrupts our lunch. He offers me a kind smile, one that screams how Bennett is about to be torn away from me.

“Hi, Liam.”

Liam nods once and looks to Bennett. There’s an immediate change in Liam’s facial features. They go from relaxed when he addressed me, to tight and tense as he speaks with Bennett off to the side. I begin to pack up lunch, knowing Bennett will have to leave. I hold in my disappointment with not being able to spend any precious time with my husband. Bennett listens intently to whatever Liam is telling him. There’s a small discussion before Bennett’s shoulders slump forward and he lowers his head while nodding. *Yep, I called it.* Bennett turns and walks over toward me, while Liam backs away and waits for him. “Darling—”

“I know,” I say. “See, I already started packing up.”

“I’m sorry, I know you went to a lot of effort.”

I stop packing and walk over to him. Reaching for his hands, I give them a gentle squeeze. “It’s okay, I understand that you have work to do.”

He kisses me on the temple before taking a step backward. “I’m not sure what time I’ll be in tonight.”

“Take care of whatever you have to.”

Bennett blows me a kiss and turns to walk away with Liam and the Secret Service detail. I’m upset, but I already knew things like this would happen. The honeymoon period of taking office is certainly over. We’ve got all the time in the world to be together, just not right now.

Once packed, I head up to the residence and make myself a lunch plate. No use letting all this food go to waste. I take my plate into the library, pick out my favorite Jane Austin book, *Pride and Prejudice*, and curl up in the wing chair to enjoy the rest of the day.

BENNETT

My alarm starts screaming, and I'm tempted to turn it off and spend the day in bed with Kathryn. But, I don't have the luxury of taking time away from the office. The world doesn't stop just because I need a day to recoup.

Kathryn and I are both fully aware this is what we were getting ourselves into. The only thing I hate is that I feel like I'm neglecting Kathryn. I roll over and kiss her shoulder. "Hmm," she murmurs in her sleep. She blinks several times at me. "What time is it?" she croaks as her eyes close again.

"It's turned five."

"I'm so tired," she groans in a thick sleepy voice.

"Stay in bed, baby."

She softly nods once. "I'm not feeling my best."

I place my hand to her forehead, but she's not feeling feverish. "You're a bit pale," I say as I lay my hand on her back, double-checking that her body temperature isn't climbing. Her cheeks are pink, but generally, she looks washed out.

"I'm really tired," she says in a soft voice.

I give her a kiss on the cheek and sweep her hair off of her face. "Stay in bed, I'll come and check on you later in the day."

"I'll be fine, I just need to sleep, that's all."

I sit up on the side of the bed and rub my hand up and down her back. Maybe I should stay with her today in case she needs me. "I'll get Jamie to push my meetings back, and I'll stay with you today."

Kathryn opens her eyes to look at me. She moves her body on the bed and reaches up to cup my cheek. "You have a country to run, and I just need to

sleep. You can't play hooky just because I'm tired." Kathryn drops her hand and tucks it under the pillow. Yawning, her eyes easily close again. "Go, I'll be fine. I'll have a sleep in, and I'll be back to my usual self by lunch."

"I'll send the doctor to check you over to make sure you're okay."

"I told you the other day it's most likely my iron levels. I've started taking iron tablets again, and I should be okay in a few days. Let me sleep, and I'll be perfect by tonight."

Standing from the bed, I head into the bathroom and seriously debate with myself about whether I should work from the residence today. When I return to the bedroom, Kathryn is already asleep. I gently swipe my hand over her forehead again to double-check her temperature. Thankfully, she doesn't feel hot, which means she's not fighting a fever, *yet...*

I make a mental note to come up and check on her at midday, because if I'm being honest, I'm worried about her. I know we're only eight days into my term in office, but the first week has been a struggle for Kathryn. I'll speak with her tonight and make sure she hires a personal assistant. I know she's been putting it off, but she needs one or she's going to be constantly exhausted.

I stand and head over to the walk-in closet. Taking one of my suits off the clothes hanger, I prepare for the start of the day.

— * —

"Tell me today is nearly over?" I ask Liam as he rushes into my office. The day started with a dilemma and they keep coming at us, mounting, one after another.

"I'm afraid not, Mr. President. A tsunami has come up out of the South China Sea and has hit the Philippines."

"Where in the Philippines?" I ask as I take my glasses off and place them on the table.

"Manila, sir."

"Shit," I grumble. Looking down at the keys of the laptop, I attempt to gain my bearings. "How long ago?"

"Twenty-two minutes."

“Twenty-two minutes? There are offshore fault lines around the Manila Trench which means they must’ve had a strong earthquake resulting in a tsunami. They’re infrequent in the Philippines, but when they happen, they can be devastating. Do we have anyone in the area?”

“We have two subs in the Indian Ocean.”

“Reach out to the Philippine president, and get whatever information they have. Do the subs have supplies?”

“I can contact General Meyers and find out.”

“Do that, and if they have supplies, turn them around and send them to the Philippines.”

“Will do, sir.”

As Liam closes the door between our offices, Jamie opens the other door leading to his and Esther’s office. “Mr. President, Gavin needs five minutes of your time.”

I lift my hand and gesture for him to show him in.

“Mr. President, I want to give you your speech for your first press conference.” He hands it to me, and I skim over it.

“No,” I say as I circle a few of the weaker words in the address. “I’m not saying we’re going to determine the progress of the world.” I look up at Gavin and shake my head before continuing to read the speech. “No.” I circle another line. “That’s insulting to the American people.” I read the rest and nod my approval. “The American people want a leader, not a friend. They have plenty of those.”

“Yes, sir.” He takes the speech and leaves my office.

Within moments, Liam returns. “There are limited supplies on the submarines, and President Ramos says they’re in desperate need of medical supplies.”

“What about casualties?”

“It’s too early to tell, but where it hit was heavily populated with locals and tourists.” He looks down for a split second before raising his head and adding, “President Ramos isn’t confident.”

“Get relief ready to airlift.”

“Thank you.” Liam disappears, giving me a moment to wrap my head around everything.

“Mr. President, it’s four in the afternoon and you’ve yet to have anything to eat. I’m calling down to the mess for you,” Esther says as she places another stack of papers on my desk. “And I need your signature on these

please.” She hands me two loose pages.

“I’ll get to it.”

“Do I have to call Mrs. Adams to come down here?” Esther snaps with a bite of sass.

“You just reminded me, I need to make time to go up to the residence and see how she is. With everything happening today, I haven’t had a chance to see her. She wasn’t feeling well this morning. I think the campaign trail and the inauguration has really taken a toll on her. And, she’s stubborn and doesn’t really want to hire a personal assistant, so she’s doing everything on her own.”

“Would you like me to send Jamie up to check on her?”

“She said she wanted to rest, but what time did you say it was?” I look at the clock on my laptop. “It’s just after four. I’ll head up and see how she is.” I sign the paperwork and hand it to Esther.

“Thank you, Mr. President.” Esther disappears out of the office.

“Mr. President, a reminder you have a five o’clock meeting with the vice president,” Jamie reminds me. “Would you like another coffee, sir?” He glances at the one that’s now gone cold because I’ve been lost in my work.

“Actually, could you arrange for some soup for Mrs. Adams?”

“I can.”

“Thank you.” Jamie is gone, and I’m left to my work.

I’m researching the work I’m doing, looking at a new bill we’re hoping to send to Capitol Hill soon.

My stomach rumbles at the reminder that I haven’t eaten anything yet. I should ask Jamie to go down to the mess and get me something. I could use the call button on my desk to call through to the kitchen, but I really want to get this day over with and spend time with Kathryn. I check the time and grumble when I see it’s now only four-thirty-two and I know I still have so much work to do.

My door bursts open, and Esther’s frantic. A blanket of cold washes over me. “What is it?” I ask, trying to keep my composure.

“Get up to the residence, *now!*” she screams and points toward the door.

Kathryn.

I’m up and out of my chair within a heartbeat. I blast through the door and run toward the elevator. “Mr. President,” Mark says, already at the elevator with the door open waiting for me.

“What’s happening, Mark?” I ask on the climb up to the residence.

Mark's jaw tightens as he lowers his chin. "What's happening?" I yell.

The door opens and I run toward our bedroom.

All the air leaves my body when I see the doctor performing chest compressions on Kathryn. "Mr. President, you can't be here," the doctor calls out forcefully.

Mark tries to pull me out of the room, and I turn and swing at him. "Don't!" I yell. Mark lifts his hands and takes a step back. I run toward the bed, but the nurses and the doctor are blocking my path to get to Kathryn. Kathryn's head is turned toward me and her eyes are open. "Baby, baby, Kathryn..." Her eyes are glassy and vacant, her lips are tinged with blue, and there's a sickening gray hue over her skin. "Baby," I whisper.

The doctor stops compressions and takes a step back. "I'm sorry, Mr. President."

"What? What? No!" I leap onto the bed and start compressions myself. "Come on!" I scream.

"Mr. President," the doctor says as he attempts to put his hand on my shoulder.

"I'll fucking save her." I push him away and get back to the compressions. "Come on, baby, breathe for me, breathe." The nurses step backward as the room fills with useless fucking people. "Help her!" I scream.

The doctor lowers his head and takes a deep breath. "She's gone."

"No, no she's not." I refuse to believe she's not with me anymore.

"Time of death, four-fifty-eight."

"No!" My compressions become fewer and slower. I look over to the doctor and shake my head. "No!" I scoop Kathryn in my arms and hold her against my body. "Come on, baby, you can't leave me! Don't leave me like this. Please." Her lips are cold as I blow air into her mouth. "I'll breathe for you, baby. I'll breathe for you." I keep trying to blow air into her mouth. But nothing I do is working. "Come on!"

Clasping Kathryn closer to me, I try everything. I rub my hand up and down her cold arms attempting to warm her. "No...no!" My chest tightens as the grim realization dawns over me. "No!" Sagging against the bed, I cradle Kathryn as my tears fall and my heart shatters. "No," my voice cracks. I gently pet her hair and kiss her forehead. Her lifeless body is slumped against me as I hold her so tightly I don't ever want to let her go.

I'm the most powerful man in the world, yet I'm powerless to save my wife.

“Please,” I plead in a small voice. “Come back to me.”

“Mr. President,” the doctor says and lays his hand on my shoulder.

“I can’t let her go. Please, don’t make me.”

“Mr. President...” I hear Liam calling. I look up to see him assessing the room. “Clear the room.” Everyone walks out and Liam closes the door. He walks over to me, and lays his hand on my back. “Bennett, I’m sorry,” his voice is small.

“She has to come back to me.” I look over my shoulder toward Liam. Tears are clinging to his cheeks as he tries to hold in his own sorrow. “I can’t do this without her.”

He shakes his head and kneels beside me and Kathryn on the floor. He hesitantly reaches out to touch her hand. “I’m sorry,” he says.

“I let her down, Liam. I failed her.”

There’s a long silence between us. “Bennett, you have to let her go.”

“I can’t.”

“You need to let her go.” My mind is breaking as I try to find a reason why I’m breathing and Kathryn isn’t. I have no idea how much time passes before Liam stands. “Bennett.” My heart is being torn out of my chest. I can’t fix this. I’m paralyzed and completely powerless. “Bennett,” Liam repeats.

With tears streaming down my cheeks, I turn a little and nod. “I know,” I acknowledge. “I’m not sure I can.”

“Kathryn’s gone.”

I don’t say a word. I squeeze my eyes shut and hold Kathryn tighter against me. “I’m sorry, my love.” I place a delicate kiss on her lifeless, cold lips before carefully lowering her to the bed and closing her eyes.

My mind is broken and my soul is weeping as I let Kathryn go. I’m so numb to everything. I don’t hear another word from anyone. As if the world has slowed to a crawl, Liam walks over to the door and opens it. One by one, people file into our bedroom. The doctor comes over to me and says something, but I can’t tear my eyes off my wife, nor can I hear the words he’s speaking.

They bring in a gurney and line it up next to the bed. I fall to my knees as I watch them delicately lift Kathryn off the bed. I’ve run out of time with my wife. Damn, I miss her so much.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper as I watch them wheel Kathryn out of the room.

The doors finally close, leaving me alone in our room.

Time has come to a crashing halt.

My soul is broken.
My heart has stopped beating.
Without my wife, I'm only half a man.

BENNETT

I feel so numb as I stand in our bedroom and look around. She's touched every part of this room. I shove my hands in my pockets and continue to stare.

It's been a week since Kathryn passed and I can't bring myself to accept it.

"Bennett," Liam's deep voice calls. I don't turn to acknowledge him. I'm not sure I can do this. "Bennett." He places his hand on my shoulder. I lower my head and exhale deeply. "We have to go."

"I know." My legs feel like they're going to buckle beneath me. My heart is drowning in pain as I try to tear myself away from our room. "I'll be there in a minute." I step further into the room, searching for anything of Kathryn's I can take with me. Her wedding and engagement rings sit on the table beside the bed, and I keep looking at them. I glance behind me to find Liam has left our bedroom. "I miss you," I say as I head over to the bed and sit on the edge. I pick her rings up and turn them in my palm several times. "Why did you leave me, baby?" I lean forward, placing my elbows on my knees and dropping my head into my hands.

My throat is closing as I struggle with life without Kathryn.

"Sir," Jamie says as he knocks once on the door.

I lift my head, and stand from the bed. I look at her rings and place them back on the bedside table. I walk over to the door but turn and glance once again around the room. "Have the room down the hall prepared for me," I instruct Jamie.

He gives me a small nod and tight smile. "Yes, sir."

I close the door to our bedroom and vow to myself to never use this room

again. It reminds me too much of Kathryn, and I'm not ready yet to let her go. *I probably will never be.* So for now, this room is off limits.

"Mr. President, Kathryn's mother has arrived," Jamie adds.

"Where is she?"

"She's downstairs."

"I want her to ride with me to the church."

Jamie flicks a look at Mark who's already relaying my request.

We head down to the portico, where the cars are waiting. The entire White House staff are in mourning. Esther is waiting with Kathryn's mom, both of them are an absolute mess. *Understandably.*

"Bennett," Lauren says and engulfs me in a hug.

I pat her back and pull away. "Sir," Mark says and holds open the door to The Beast.

"Thank you," I say and wait for Lauren to slide in before I do.

Mark closes the door, and I release a stressed breath. "Thank you, Bennett," Lauren starts.

"For what?"

"Allowing me to accompany you."

"You're Kathryn's mother. Of course I want you here with me." Lauren's lips thin and her eyes glisten with tears. I reach for her hand and hold it in mine. "I know," I say when she sucks in a breath and a few tears spill over her cheeks.

The ride to the church is hard. My heart is hammering and I'm doing everything I can to hold on to my emotions. There's a dull pain behind my eyes and an ache deep in my soul from missing my Kathryn. She's gone, and she'll never return to me. I've spent my life loving her and now, she's gone.

When the cars pull up at the church, the Secret Service agents surround us. I look to Lauren, and an unspoken agreement passes between us.

"Mark," I say.

"Yes, sir." He gives the okay for the door to be opened. I slide out and reach for Lauren's arm. She huddles into me as we walk past the sea of reporters and cameras all taking our photos.

A few people offer flowers but I can't take them. Jamie and Esther kindly walk the line to collect the well-wishes.

We walk into the church and I see her coffin ahead of us. My chin quivers as I keep my eyes on her casket. It's tastefully decorated with so many brightly colored flowers, but inside that box is my wife. *My darling wife.*

Lauren's breath hitches, and I can tell by her trembling body that she's crying. I wrap my arm around her shoulders and draw her in close to me.

My parents are sitting in the second pew, and as we approach them, Mom steps forward and runs her hand up and down my arm. "Thanks, Mom," I say in a shaky voice.

Her eyes are watering, but she offers me an encouraging smile. "We're here for you, son." Mom looks to Lauren, then steps in and hugs her. "I'm so sorry, Lauren."

"Thank you," Lauren manages to choke.

Lauren and I move to sit in the front pew, and soon the priest stands and begins his sermon. I blankly stare at the coffin, holding on to my emotions as a few people stand and give their eulogies.

Before I know it, I'm being called upon to give mine.

I take a deep breath and stand. With shaky hands and slow steps, I walk up to the church podium. The casket is a painful reminder of a life without my love.

I can do this. Not because I want to, but because I owe it to my wife.

I take the papers out of my suit jacket breast pocket and with shaking hands, I place them on the podium.

The words I speak over the next few moments are what is expected of the president to say. I do everything in my power to avoid losing control of my emotions while standing in front of all these people.

But finally, my voice cracks as I finish with the eulogy. I look over to Kathryn's casket and close my eyes. "I already miss you," I whisper.

I give it a few seconds before I lower my chin and walk back to the front pew.

The rest of the most horrendous thing I've ever experienced goes by in a complete blur. Before I know it, a small group of close friends and family are at the cemetery where we're all standing around a fucking hole in the ground.

"Bennett," Mom says and places her hand on my shoulder. I look to her and lift my chin. "I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

"I know," I say robotically.

The casket is lowered while words of scripture are recited.

I'm numb. Completely emotionless as I stare at the wooden box. I can't tear my eyes away from the love of my life. She's the only woman I've ever wanted, the only person I've truly loved with every part of me.

Kathryn has been my heartbeat for so long that I'm not sure my heart will

ever beat again.

One by one, everyone disappears, leaving me to watch the mound of dirt on top of the wooden box grow. I can't bear to tear my eyes away. "My love," I whisper.

I can't do this. I can't be without my Kathryn. I don't know how, and I refuse to learn.

When everyone is gone and the only people left are the Secret Service agents and me, I crouch by the hole.

"Baby," I whisper. "I've loved you for so long that I don't know how to stop." My chin quivers and my eyes water. "I don't want to do this without you." I close my eyes and lower my chin. "I'm sorry, baby. I'm sorry I was powerless and couldn't help you." I cover my head with my hands and burst into tears. "I'm sorry." The tightness in my chest is merciless. All my despair is seeping uncontrollably out of my body. "I'm sorry." I fist my hand through my hair as I finally crumble.

"I've got you," Liam says through his own heavy tears. His arms engulf me as I completely lose it.

"She's gone," I say through the heavy tears. "She's fucking gone."

"I've got you, Bennett. I've got you," he repeats.

My head is pounding while my throat thickens with all the things I never got to say to my wife. "I don't know if I can do this without her."

"We'll get through it."

I know life is supposed to go on.

But how?

BENNETT

THIRTEEN MONTHS LATER

“What a day,” I say to Liam. “Wanna come up for dinner?”

“I have no prior engagements, so hell, yeah, I do. Give me ten and I’ll be back.”

I acknowledge his request with a nod. “Jamie!” I call.

He’s in my office within seconds. “Can I help you, Mr. President?”

“I’m retiring for the evening. You need to also. You have exams next week.” I pointedly look to him.

“Nothing gets past you, sir,” Jamie says with a grin.

I stop packing my desk and look over to Jamie. “Tomorrow’s Friday. Don’t come in to work.”

“What? Why?”

“Because you need to study.”

“I’m doing fine, sir. I can do this.”

“I know you can, but I’m telling you, if I see you here tomorrow, I won’t be happy.”

A small snicker escapes him. “Yes, sir.” He steps back toward the door. “Have a good night.”

“You too.” Jamie exits my office and I finish packing. By the time I’m done, Liam still hasn’t returned. I walk over to the door that leads to Esther and Jamie’s office. Opening it I find Jamie has already left. Esther’s packing her things for the evening.

She stops what she’s doing and looks over at me. “Mr. President, is there anything I can do for you?”

“No, I was coming to tell you I’m heading up to the residence.”

“Have a good night, sir.”

“Thank you. Enjoy yours, too.”

She smirks and arches a brow. “I’m going out for a night on the town,” she says with excitement.

“Oh, where are you off to?”

“I have a friend coming in for the next two nights, and we’re having dinner and drinks.”

“Sounds wild,” I tease.

“Oh yes, sir, it will be. I might even stay up past midnight.” She lifts her hand and places it to her mouth, as if she’s telling me a super-secret I should be scolding her over.

“It is a school night,” I warn.

“Well, don’t worry. We’re not playing beer pong.”

I chuckle as I shake my head. “Good to hear. I wouldn’t want you showing up tomorrow hungover.” Esther and I both share a small laugh. “Have a good evening with your friend.”

“Will do.”

As I close the door, I turn and find Liam in my office. “I heard beer pong. Now, if it’s going to be a wild night, I need to prepare myself for it.” He holds his hands up in surrender. “I’m thinking we sneak in the strippers and they can bring the pizza.”

“Strippers and pizza, sounds like we’re about to have a wild night too!” I clap a hand to Liam’s shoulder as we walk out of the Oval Office. “I’ll have the chef prepare a couple of steaks.”

“Steaks are good. Not too much of that green shit though, Mr. President.”

“Liam.” I tilt my head down and glance at him as we head toward the elevator to go up to the residence. He knows when we’re out of work to address me by my name. “Go ahead to the dining room, I’ll put my briefcase away,” I head into my bedroom and place my briefcase on the table. A photo on the mantel catches my eye. I walk over to it and pick it up. Sweeping my thumb over Kathryn’s face, I let out a small sigh. “I miss you.” I place the frame back on the mantel and stare at it for a moment before leaving my bedroom.

Liam has two scotches ready for us on the dining table. “You’re not sleeping in the master bedroom?” I shake my head. “It’s been thirteen months, Bennett.”

“I can’t bring myself to go back in there.” I lift the scotch and walk over to the fireplace. “I miss her.”

“You’ve thrown yourself into work, and you’re barely sleeping—”

“How do you know I’m barely sleeping?”

“Let me see.” He taps his finger to his chin as he stares at me. “I’ve been your best friend since we were kids.” He lifts his scotch and sips on it. “Other than an occasional dinner in the residence, you’ve shut down.” I open my mouth to argue but he holds his hand up to me. “You’re in the office at two in the morning, and you don’t leave until whatever time you think is good to go.” Liam’s right though, I’ve been avoiding everyone I’ve ever had a connection with.

I slam the rest of the scotch back and head over to the bar to pour myself another. “This job is the only thing I have going for me. It’s keeping me alive.”

“Look, I know this is hard, but you need more. I miss Kathryn too. You know I often think about what we did and how the hell did a bunch of teenagers pull that off.”

A smirk tugs at my lips. “We were just kids.”

“It was crazy. But, we did it. We all kept it together long enough that you ended up with Kathryn and Jen was able to break away from her overcontrolling parents.” There’s a tense pause as I sit and look at the rug, thinking about how crazy we were to even think that we could make it work, but somehow, it did. “Maybe it’s time to take a step forward.”

“I can’t,” I honestly admit. In truth, since Kathryn’s death I *have* been putting up walls and not letting anyone in. Not even Liam. “I’m not ready to let her go.”

“I’m not asking you to. This is a lonely job, Bennett. You’ve got me, but we both know that it’s been different since Kathryn passed.”

I shake my head as I take a sharp breath. “It’s not like I can go down to a bar and pick someone up.” Liam opens his mouth to say something, and I hold my hand up to him. “Nor do I want to.”

“What about having someone as a companion?”

“I’m not sure if you know, but I can’t go anywhere and find a *companion*. My face would be plastered everywhere.”

“There are other avenues. Here.” Liam takes his wallet out of his back pocket, and hands me a card. “They’re discreet.”

I take the card and look at it. My brows rise as I read the matte black card with gold-embossed, elegant writing. “Julianne?” I turn the card over in my hand and there’s a number in the same font as the front. “What’s this?”

“She’s a woman I have an arrangement with.”

“You’ve hired a hooker?”

“No, she’s an escort. I pay for her time.”

“Her time? And you have sex with her?”

“We enjoy each other’s company,” he says cryptically.

I shove the card back into his hand. “No, I’m not doing that.”

“Why? The company Julianne works for is incredibly discreet, and they have a way of matching people. Julianne is great; she’s exactly what I need. She’s low maintenance, we know precisely where we both stand, and the best part is there are no emotions. Neither of us are walking away thinking the other wants a relationship. She knows who I am, and she doesn’t ask any questions at all. And I had her and the company completely investigated so I know no one is going to be leaking this to the press.”

I swirl my second scotch around in my glass. Walking over to the phone, I call down to the kitchen and order two steaks with a side of mushrooms and broccoli to be delivered up to the residence. Though, my head is reeling with the possibility of having no-strings-attached company from time to time. “How long have you been seeing Julianne?”

“A little over six months.”

“What are the arrangements?”

“What do you mean?”

I head over to the two wing chairs in front of the fire and indicate for Liam to sit with me. It’s crazy I’m even entertaining this bizarre idea of hiring an escort. “How do you pay for the service?”

“They have two options, first there’s a monthly subscription fee, or there’s a one-off fee. However, you have to have four one-off dates before the subscription service is offered.”

A smile stretches my lips as I stare at the roaring fire. “I take it the one-off fees are high?”

“They are, but so are the monthly subscription fees.”

“What exactly are you paying for?” I clear my throat, completely surprised by my interest. However, this may be an option to alleviate some of this frustration that my hand is a poor remedy for.

“The subscription service depends on your...” Liam smirks and tries to gesture with his hands. “...needs,” he finally says.

“Tell me about your arrangement with Julianne.” I squint and shake my head. “Let me clarify, how many times a month do you see her?”

“I have a standing date with her every Tuesday and Saturday.”

“Wow, okay. Is it...” Now this is turning awkward. “Is it dinner and more, or just the more?”

Liam laughs. “She comes to my house for two hours, and sometimes we talk, sometimes her mouth is too busy doing other things.”

I scrub my hand across the sudden tension at my forehead. “That might be a little too much information for me.”

“Bennett, I know you can’t go out and pick someone up. You’re also not the kind of guy who’s ever been interested in one-night stands. But it might be best for you to experience something more than this.” Liam looks around the dining room.

“Mr. President,” Mark announces from the entry of the dining room.

The waiter enters with a food cart and places the food on the dining table. “Thank you,” I say.

“Thank you,” Liam echoes.

“You’re welcome. Is there anything else I can do for you tonight, sir?”

“No, that’s all. You can go.”

“Have a good evening.” The waiter pushes the now-empty food cart out, leaving Liam and me alone.

“So,” I start as I look at the juicy steak. “You and Julianne.”

“It’s easy. I can make the call for you.”

My hands still as I slowly look over at Liam. “I can make my own arrangements. I don’t need you to do it.”

Liam wryly scoffs. *Smart-ass*. “It might be best if I call. That way there’s no direct line to you.”

What a ridiculous idea, hiring a damned escort. I’ve suddenly lost my appetite. “I’m not ready for this,” I say. “I feel like I’m betraying Kathryn.”

Liam slowly chews, causing a much-deserved long pause. “You know you’re not,” he finally replies. “But we both know you need this.” I look over at him and raise my brows. “You’ve been working yourself to the bone, snapping at people for the smallest reasons. Not to mention, you’re on your own all the time. I know how lonely this can be, which is why Julianne is a breath of fresh air for me. The best part is there are no complications. And when I see her, it’s enough to clear my head so I’m energized and ready for this job.” He takes a breath and eats more of his steak. “I’m trying to convince you because I believe in this narrative, Bennett.”

All I can think about is that it’s betraying Kathryn. “If I wasn’t the

president, then maybe.”

“Bullshit.” I look toward Liam who’s shaking his head. “Regardless of the position you hold, you’d be the same.”

“There’s so much wrong with this entire idea.”

“No, there isn’t.”

“Being a prostitute is illegal in every state—”

“They’re escorts, not prostitutes,” Liam cuts me off.

“We’re splitting hairs here, Liam.”

“Wow, talk about being naïve. No, we’re not. There’s no guarantee of sex in exchange for money. It’s her time, not her body.”

“But if I’m wanting sex, then what?”

“Then you’ll need to have that conversation with her. Look, the only other alternative I see working is a blow-up doll.” My posture stiffens as the right side of my lip slightly rises. “Yeah, my sentiments exactly.”

I’m not the type of person who shares his feelings with anyone; it was bad enough I saw a psychologist when Kathryn died. But this is something else. I’m quite literally talking about my sex life with my best friend and chief of staff. “This really isn’t a conversation I thought I’d ever be having with you.”

Liam bursts into a full laugh. “Trust me, talking to you about my sex life is the last thing I ever thought *I’d* be doing. Hell, we’re not kids anymore.”

“I was quite literally thinking the same thing.” At least the air isn’t as tense or strained as it was a few moments ago. I cut another chunk of steak and hesitate to eat it. “Should we run a discreet poll?”

“God, no! That would be career suicide. Actually.” Liam’s brows draw in and he taps his fork on the side of the plate. “We can run a poll if you want. See what people would think if a senator was caught with their pants down.”

I shake my head at the ludicrous idea. “No, don’t do it. It was an insane idea. Look.” I wave my hand at him. “Let’s forget about this conversation.”

“Hell, no, I’m not forgetting about it. You’re my best friend, Bennett, and I can’t keep watching you withdraw the way you have been. This is the most difficult job in the world, and you need some kind of relief from it.” He takes the card out of his pocket and pushes it over toward me. “Call.”

I leave the card sitting on the dining table while I change the subject and continue eating. All the while, the card with the beautiful gold-embossed writing taunts me. Our conversations morph from one subject to another easily, but that damn card is provoking me. Every possible scenario plays

through my head. What if I do this and the media catches on? Or, what if I do this, and there's no chemistry at all? Or worse still, what if there's too much chemistry and I like her more than I should? No, that can't happen. It's impossible because there'll never be another Kathryn. No one could ever fill Kathryn's shoes in any way, and there'd be no chance in hell I'd want them to either. Besides, I can't see myself having any kind of relationship with an escort outside of the bedroom. But, in all honesty, to have that connection with someone would feel nice. I do miss that level of intimacy and a tender touch. "Fine," I say while Liam is talking about one of the policies we're trying to push through.

"Fine what?"

I push the card back toward him. "Make the call for me. I can't do it, because if I do and it's found out, this entire administration will be in a world of pain."

Liam clears his throat and slides the card off the table. "Are you sure?"

"Don't ask me that question, because no, I'm not." I'm a nanosecond away from changing my mind.

He nods once and puffs his chest out. "I'll take care of it."

"She needs to be blonde."

"Blonde?" Liam's forehead crinkles.

"I want her as completely opposite to Kathryn as possible. I don't want to look in her eyes and see my wife. I want no strings at all." I chew on the inside of my cheek. "Blonde, and meek. I can't have her like Kathryn, nothing at all."

"I'll make it happen."

Running my hand through my hair, I'm tempted to call this off before it goes too far. The possibility of collateral damage is eating away at me. But, if I keep it professional, which Liam assures me this service is, then it could be what I need. A part of me regrets agreeing to this, and wants to backpedal, but I also know this'll be good for me, and ultimately, will do my staff and the country good.

Jesus, what a way to justify hiring an escort.

One Week Later

Liam waltzes into my office and sits at the chair in front of my desk. I look up over my glasses at him. "Mary," he says.

"Mary?" I wait a second for him to respond, but the smug look on his

face is telling me I'm going to have to probe further if I want an answer. I take my glasses off and place them on the desk. Rubbing at my eyes, I exhale loudly and shake my head. "Who's Mary?"

"Mary will be here after work tomorrow, at ten p.m., for two hours. I've spoken with Mark, and he understands how discreet we need to be."

Oh, Mary. I pull my shoulders back and stretch my neck in an uncomfortable tilt. "Mary?"

Liam stands and taps my desk once. "You're welcome." He silently leaves my office.

Okay, so I'm doing this. I have to establish my own personal ground rules. She's merely company for me, nothing more. If I feel myself experiencing feelings I don't want, I'll end it and not look at this again. I have a country to run, and I can't allow something like emotions to cloud my judgement. Only small talk, nothing meaningful and certainly nothing too personal. I trust Liam, so he can handle this—within reason.

Mary is simply a means to an end.

That's all.

BENNETT

I pace back and forth in my room as I wait for Mary. I shouldn't be doing this, I'm not ready for it to happen. My stomach is churning with uncertainty and nausea. My heart is hammering and my throat is constricting.

"Get it together," I scold myself. I close my eyes and take several deep breaths. I need to focus and just get this over and done with. I open my eyes and walk over to the cabinet where I pour myself a scotch and throw it back. The amber liquid instantly takes the tension out of my high shoulders. "You've got this." I pour myself a second drink and nurse it as I continue to wait for Mary.

The knock on my door immediately forces my shoulders high again and constricts my throat. *Shit, shit, shit.*

I pull in two deep breaths and roll my shoulders, willing myself to relax. I walk over to the door and open it. "Sir," Mark says. "Your appointment is here."

We exchange a brief knowing look before he steps aside for Mary.

"Mr. President," Mary says as she enters my bedroom.

Shit, this is actually happening. "Mary, it's a pleasure to meet you." I close the door, then turn to offer her my hand.

"The pleasure is mine, sir."

"Bennett," I correct.

Mary is exactly what I was hoping for. She's tall and slender, with short blonde hair and green eyes. She's cute, but if I was out at a bar, I wouldn't look at her with lust. "Bennett," she says and places her small hand in mine.

"Would you care for a drink?" I offer as I head over to pour myself a third scotch.

“Sure. A soda please.”

A soda? Perhaps I better not have my third scotch. I’ve put a lot of pressure on myself about this; I’d hate to be the ‘dud president’ who can’t get it up. I open the small fridge and take out a soda. Opening it, I pour the contents into a glass and turn to hand it to Mary. “Here you go.”

Her bag is still hanging off her shoulder as she sips on the soda. God, there’s so much tension in the room. This is a big mistake. I shouldn’t have agreed to this. Mary glances behind me and advances toward the books I have on the shelf. She tilts her head as she reads the spines of all of them. “*To Kill a Mockingbird*. I loved the movie.”

Good Lord, she hasn’t read it? “That book was one of my wife’s favorites.”

She releases a small chuckle. “I take it your reading enjoyment is all constitution stuff?”

“There’s always work to do.” I run my hand through my hair, feeling like this is an utter mess. “Do you like to read?”

“Not really.”

My entire soul shudders. Mary really is nothing at all like Kathryn. At least that’s a good thing because I know there’s no chance of this turning into anything more than a transaction. “What do you enjoy doing?” I ask, hoping we can at least hold a semi-interesting conversation.

“I like to hang out with my friends.”

I walk over to the small table with two chairs and sit. “I’m going to be honest with you, I’ve never done this before.”

She walks away from my mini-library and pulls out the chair opposite me to sit. “I can tell.” She smiles. “What do you enjoy, Bennett?” The hair on the back of my neck rises, and I hate that I have to have this conversation with anyone. “Straight sex? Anal, blow jobs, cunnilingus, domination, submission? What exactly do you enjoy?” I blink several times, clearly not having thought this through. “Do you like to dress up? Do you want me to dress up? Do you like toys? I can use them on you, you can use them on me. I won’t have sex with more than you unless I’m paid for it. I don’t kiss because I don’t like it, and I don’t eat ass. My hard *no way in hell* are drugs, animals, underage. I also won’t have sex with women over seventy.”

I feel my eyes widen with her list of nos. “That’s quite a list.”

“I’m all for degradation, but I also draw the line at spanking me across the face. No blood play, or golden showers, or fecal matter.”

Okay then. “I’m agreeable to that list.”

She stands and unzips her dress, allowing it to fall to the floor. She’s not wearing a bra or panties, so she’s standing bare in front of me. She’s free from hair nearly everywhere. “I won’t have sex without a condom either.”

“Good to know.”

She stoops to pick her bag up and hands me an assortment of condoms. “These are the only ones I use, so, pick one.”

The realization that Mary is treating this like a job is calming. It means I have zero chance of this arrangement becoming emotional and messy. I *can* do this.

“Get on the bed,” I say to her. Relief floods me because I know this is nothing more than sex.

Silently, Mary walks over to the bed. “How do you want me?”

“On all fours.” She climbs up on the bed and slightly spreads her legs. From where I’m sitting I can see her asshole and her pussy lips. “Spread your legs.” Thankfully Mary listens and does exactly what I ask.

My cock twitches in my pants as I watch her on the bed. She peers back over her shoulder. Mary looks me over and says, “I’m ready.” Her tone belies her. It’s flat and lifeless.

I stand from where I’ve been sitting and grab one of her condoms off the table. “Face forward.” She turns and hangs her head down.

I unzip my pants and rub my hand up and down my shaft to make me hard before I slide the condom on. Moving toward her, I impale her in one go. Her groan is forced and cold, exactly how this entire interaction has been. I grab Mary’s hips and thrust several times trying to forget how bizarre this entire situation is. She feels different, not anything like what I was expecting.

I close my eyes as I fuck her, trying to concentrate on the feeling, rather than allowing my head to get in the way. It doesn’t take long before I grow feverish with lust, as my heart pounds inside my chest. I bear down as a shudder of pleasure overtakes me.

Once I come, I pull out of Mary and walk into the bathroom, disposing of the condom. “Get dressed,” I say from the bathroom.

When I return, Mary is sitting on the side of the bed, dressed, and ready to leave. “You have me for another hour.” She looks to my crotch and lifts her brows.

I don’t want to look at her. I walk over to the door and open it. “Mark, get Mary home.” I stand to the side and wait for her to exit.

She slides her feet into her shoes, picks her bag up, and leaves the room. I'm not really sure this is something I want to do again.

I head into the bathroom and take a shower before I go to bed. I need to wash any reminder of Mary off of me.

This isn't for me.

BENNETT

The bashing on the door startles me. “What?” I yell as I sit up in bed. The door opens and Liam waltzes in. He’s smirking and lifts a brow when he sees I’m trying to blink myself awake. “Is the world falling apart?”

“Not at the moment.”

“Why the fuck are you waking me at...” I pause to look at my watch. “Fuck, it’s nine.” I push the covers back and leap out of bed.

“You haven’t slept like this since—” Liam pulls back before he slips up. “So, she was good.”

I head over to the closet and take out a pressed suit, shirt, and tie. “I thought it was a complete waste of time.” I pause and look down at the carpet. “It wasn’t something I thought I needed, but, maybe I do.”

“Was it okay?”

I walk out of the closet with my clothes. “It was clinical. I could’ve stuck my dick in a hole in the wall and I would’ve had the same emotional connection.”

“You don’t want an emotional connection though, do you?”

I slightly tilt my head to the side and blink a few times. “No, I don’t.” I jerk my chin to the door. “Grab me a coffee please.”

“Sure.” Liam leaves the room giving me a moment to quickly slide on my pants and my shirt. When he returns, he has a coffee for himself and one for me. “Obviously she did something for you or you wouldn’t have slept until nine.”

“Honestly, once she left last night, I thought I was going to say no to more. But I needed that, and I finally slept.” I take my coffee and sip on it. “She has the personality of a fish.”

“That’s an interesting comparison. What type of fish?” I look to Liam who chuckles.

“I’m surprised I don’t feel guilty for doing this to Kathryn.”

“Because Kathryn wouldn’t want you to become a recluse. Given, it’s hard not to be when you’re the president.”

“I know,” I say as I tuck my shirt into my pants, then look around for my belt. “I think I want to see Mary again.”

“I can set that up.”

“Let me consider it and I’ll let you know.”

“When you’re ready.” I like that Liam isn’t pushy. “Jamie pushed your trade meeting to tomorrow. There’s the union meeting at ten and the vice president wants ten minutes with you this morning.”

“Set it up through Jamie.” I sit on the chair to tie my shoelaces. “I’ll be down in the office soon.”

Liam nods and backs out of my room. I finish dressing, take my briefcase, and head down the hallway. As I’m walking toward the elevator, I stop at the bedroom Kathryn and I shared for a handful of days.

I reach out for the door handle, then pull my hand back. I haven’t been in this room since the funeral. There’s a lump forming at the base of my throat, but I finally open the door and step inside.

I’m half expecting to smell her perfume when I walk into the room. Thankfully, I don’t or the guilt about what I did last night would eat me alive. I turn to look at Mark. “I need a minute.”

Mark stiffens but closes the door to give me privacy.

I place my briefcase on the floor beside the door and hesitantly advance toward the bed. Everything is in pristine condition. Nothing has been touched.

I sit on the edge of the bed and look around the room. My eyes land on Kathryn’s rings and with shaky hands, I reach out to take them. “I don’t know what to do,” I whisper as I turn the rings over and over in my palm.

I know if the roles were reversed, I’d want Kathryn to move on and be happy but I’m struggling to wrap my head around putting myself in the same position.

There’s one thing I know though, that it’s time to begin to move on. “There’s never going to be anyone else, baby.” I close my fingers around her rings. I take another moment before pushing up and shoving her rings into my pocket. I pick my briefcase up and open the door.

“Sir,” Mark says as he glimpses inside the bedroom.

“How’s your day, Mark?”

“Surprisingly uneventful.”

“Just the way we like it,” I say as we wait for the elevator doors to open.

“Precisely.” Mark smirks.

Once in the Oval Office, I head out to find Jamie. He’s sitting at his desk and he looks up when he sees me. “Sir. I’ll get your coffee.”

“Thank you.” I head back into the office and wait until Jamie’s bought in my coffee. “Jamie,” I say before he retreats to his desk.

“Sir?”

“I need you to do something for me.”

“Of course.” He stands tall and pulls his shoulders back. “I need you to arrange for um…” Shit, this is harder than I thought it was going to be. “I need for Kathryn’s clothing to be packed and donated.”

Jamie’s eyes widen and for a split second, I’m waiting for pushback from him. “Of course, Sir,” he says. He hovers for a few seconds. “Is that all?”

I’m fighting with myself; a part of me wants to tell him to forget about it and leave things exactly how they are, but I know I can’t keep living in the past. It’s not healthy.

Not for me, and not for those around me. I need to rebuild my life.

“Thank you.” I open my briefcase and search for my reading glasses.

I hear the door close, and I look up to stare at it.

It’s been thirteen months since Kathryn has passed and although it’s been unbearable, little by little, I’m learning to breathe again.

I’ll never love another the way I loved her.

It’s impossible.

EPILOGUE

REELECTION YEAR

My standing appointment with Mary is a godsend tonight. I just need a moment to step away from all the stress I've been under. Walking out of my office, my phone rings as I head toward the residence. I slide my phone out of my pocket and look at the name. Liam knows I need the next few hours to regroup. I end the call as Mark holds the elevator door open for me. My phone rings again as the elevator ascends. "Yes, Liam," I say with a touch of annoyance.

"There are a few things we need to discuss."

I walk toward the bedroom and begin to open the door. "I said I..." I lift my chin to see Mary isn't in the room. "I'll call you back." I slide my phone into my jacket pocket and eye the magnificent woman nervously standing in front of me. Her dark eyes widen as she draws her lower lip between her teeth. The dirty things I instantly want to do to that mouth of hers. I gain my composure and arch a brow. "Who are you?" I need Mary back. I've never had such a staggering or triggering reaction to anyone, well, not since Kathryn.

She steps forward and offers me her shaky hand. "My name is Reece Maxwell, Mr. President."

I want her. No, no, I can't let myself be affected by her. What is it about her though? She's breathtakingly beautiful, yet so...I don't know how to describe this feeling. My damned heart is beating like it's been jump-started. I don't dare take her hand, or I might end up pulling her toward me and kissing her like she's never been kissed before. I fold my arms against my chest to stop myself from reaching out to her. "Reece?"

Her eyes drop as if she's disappointed, and she takes a step backward.

“Yes, sir.”

My cock hardens when she calls me sir. I need her. I want her. I want to bend and break her. Fuck her until she screams with pleasure. I want her like I’ve wanted only one woman before. “Where’s Mary?” Right now, I need Mary. I need Mary because she’s safe and there are no heightened feelings when I’m with her.

Reece’s breath hitches as her shoulders slightly tilt forward. She quickly regroups and lifts her chin toward me. “I’m sorry, sir, but Mary was unable to make it tonight.”

I know I’m staring at her intently, because I’m trying to figure out if I can actually go through with this. “Why am I the last one to hear about this?”

“I don’t know why you’re the last one to hear about this. Maybe ask whoever’s been organizing your meetings,” Reece snaps with a level of irritation. I slowly tilt my head at her word vomit. Her eyes widen and she slightly shakes her head. Lifting her chin, she clears her throat. “I apologize, Mr. President. I can leave and let Sofia know you only want Mary.”

No, I want Reece, not Mary. I don’t ever want to see Mary again. “Who’s Sofia?”

She takes a small, sharp breath as she lowers her head for a split second. “My apologies, Mr. President. There seems to have been a miscommunication somehow.” A miscommunication? Are you kidding? This is phenomenal. She walks away from me, reaches for her bag, and makes a beeline for the door.

What the fuck? No. “What are you doing?” I reach for her, refusing to let her walk out of the bedroom. My fingers tighten around her upper arm and I can’t help but notice Reece’s lips slightly part as she slowly drops her gaze to look at where my hand is holding on to her. Jesus, what am I doing? I’m scaring her. “I should be the one to apologize,” I say, trying not to frighten her any more than she already is. “Please, stay.” I take a few steps backward, creating a distance between us. There’s a moment of hesitation from her, but thankfully, she agrees to stay. “Would you care for a drink?” I need as much space between us as I can get, or I’m afraid I’ll ravage her without getting to know a single thing about her. I pour myself a scotch.

“No, thank you, Mr. President.”

I pick my scotch up and head over to sit on the side of the bed. “Tell me about yourself.” Jesus, what am I doing? This shouldn’t be personal. I shouldn’t be asking these questions, she’s here for three hours, and never

again. No, no, that's not what I want. I want her. What am I doing?

"What would you like to know?"

Everything. "How old are you?" I sip on my drink as I eagerly hang on every one of her words.

"I'm twenty-five, sir." She wrings her hands together nervously.

She's thirteen years younger than I am. *Shit.* "Twenty-five?"

"Yes, sir." She smiles stiffly.

Twenty-fucking-five. I drink what's in my glass before standing to pour myself another scotch. "You clearly know who I am." I shouldn't be doing this with her. She's...*different.* Reece is not who I was expecting, and this is stirring up feelings I promised myself I never wanted to experience again.

"Of course." Why is she so damn gorgeous?

"Have you signed an NDA?"

Reece's lips curl and her shoulders stiffen. "It's a requirement at the agency, sir," she spits the words with an air of confrontation.

Is she mocking me? I turn away from her, hiding my own smirk. My little minx is a spitfire. "You can't discuss this, not with anyone," I say, almost scolding.

"I'm aware."

"What happens here stays here."

"Yes, sir, I know." Why do I feel like she wants to dare to say something she knows she shouldn't, especially to me.

"Who else have you been with?"

Reece blows out a deep breath as her lips form a beautiful O. My cock strains in my pants, desperate for her to be on her knees before me while I fuck that perfect mouth. "Who have you been with?" she retorts.

I pull my shoulders back and furrow my brows. "I beg your pardon?"

"I don't discuss clients with other clients."

I'm a client? I don't want to be a client, I want more. "I'm the president," I baldly reply.

"Yes, sir, you are. But don't ask me for any personal information on my clients, because I won't give it to you."

I don't like this, not at all. I'm a heartbeat away from forbidding her to continue with this ridiculous profession of hers. "Who have you been with?" I repeat with more urgency.

She crinkles her brows and slightly shakes her head. "I'm not discussing this with you."

“I can bring the Secret Service in here and have them interrogate you. Or, I could bring the whole weight of my office down on your agency and find out every single one of your past clients.” I can’t believe myself. I’m appalled at my own behavior.

“I have no idea what arrangements you have with Mary. But *I* don’t discuss clients.” Reece looks down at the floor to compose herself. I’ve never asked Mary about her clients, because frankly, I don’t care. “If you want me to tell you about my clients, then be prepared for me to tell those clients about you.”

A burst of annoyance passes through me. I march over to Reece and wrap my hands around her upper arms. Her abrupt inhalation causes me to look down at her kissable lips. I step closer to her, desperate to be inside of her. “You’ll speak to no one of me.”

Reece’s pretty pink tongue peeks out and wets her lips. “I speak to no one of anything.” Her breath is rapid as her body slightly tilts forward into mine.

I’ve only ever wanted one other woman with this much ferocity. “Who have you been with?” I don’t want to know, because it’ll kill me to know she’s been with other men. I hate knowing that already.

“None of your business. Just because you’re the president, it doesn’t give you the right to know about my clients.” She tries to break out of my hold, but I tighten my grip on her arms. I refuse to release her.

“It gives me every right.”

She holds up her chin. Reece’s determination is refreshing and alluring. “Perhaps I’m not the woman you need tonight.”

Damn her and her smart mouth. My arousal and desire drive me to cover my mouth over hers, declaring to Reece that she’s mine and no one else’s. I walk her toward the bed, and stop when there’s resistance coming from the mattress. I take a step back and eye her tight body. “Take the dress off. Leave the shoes on.” She unzips her dress, wiggles and steps out of it. My breath becomes caught in my chest as I stare at her. “Fuck.” I rotate my finger in a circular motion. “Twirl around.” I take a small step back to watch her spin.

Reece smiles slowly and carefully turns, showing off her magnificent body. She straightens her back and sticks her ass out at me. I want to fall to my knees and bite those cheeks before burying my head between her thighs and feasting on her like the starving man I am. She draws her bottom lip between her teeth causing me to focus on her mouth. She deftly brings her hand up to her mouth and runs her finger over her lower lip before sucking on

the tip. Oh my God. She's going to be phenomenal with my cock in her mouth. "What is it you want from me, *Mr. President?*" Reece moves to sit on the edge of the bed and opens her legs. Her tiny thong is hiding nothing. I find myself speechless, and desperate. She moves the little scrap of material aside and rubs her fingers over her bare pussy. A small groan of pleasure grumbles from deep inside her. "Do you want to taste me?" She moves her hand from her pussy and runs her wetness over her lips. *Jesus.* "Or would you like me on my knees?" Effortlessly, she slides off the bed to her knees and opens her mouth waiting for my cock to fill her. She coyly looks up to me and seductively pushes her tits out. "What do you want?" Reece plays with her nipples through her bra. "Or, do you prefer to watch?" She's teasing me, sending me insane with hunger. *I crave Reece Maxwell.*

No, no. I can't let this be more than it is. She's an escort, and I'm the president. I can't allow this to happen. No, I can't. It takes me a second to push any kind of feelings I might have aside. I step forward and unzip my pants. I thread my fingers through her hair and impale her mouth with my now rock-hard cock. "That's it, take it all." I tighten my grip on her hair as I fuck her mouth. She's amazing at this. There are small gurgling sounds as I drive my cock deeper in her mouth. "Such a good girl," I say holding onto my release while watching her eyes water and drool drip out of her mouth. Reece's warm hand plays with my balls, causing my body to hurtle toward release. If she's this good with her mouth, I can only dream of the pleasure she'll bring once I'm inside her.

I want my cum to fill her mouth, make her choke until she can't swallow it fast enough. No, I can't allow it to be that personal. I pull my cock out of her mouth, grab it and rub my hand up and down my hard shaft. Closing my eyes, I feel my body tense right before I spurt my cum all over the bed. A small mew of desire escapes from Reece's mouth. I open my eyes and look over at her. "Thank you." I tuck my cock back into my pants. Holding my hand out to her, I assist her to stand before I step backward putting distance between us. "You can leave." I feel like an asshole, but I can't have her here for another moment, let alone another two hours. This entire encounter is dangerous for me.

"You want me to leave?" she asks, her voice is dripping with hurt.

I turn my back to her and go to pour another drink for myself. "Yes, you can leave." I should've gotten rid of her the moment I saw her. I turn to make sure she's putting her dress on and find her smiling, maybe even smirking.

“Why are you smiling?”

She stills and stares at me. “Pardon?”

“You were smiling, why?”

“I was thinking, that’s all.”

“About?”

“Um.” Reece lifts her brows and clicks her tongue to the roof of her mouth. “Usually my clients want more.”

There she goes again with that revolting word. *Clients*. I hate how she sees me as a damned client. I lean against the wall and drink my scotch. She has to go. I can’t be near her. “Thank you for your time.”

She grabs her bag and heads toward the door. “Have a good night,” she says with that spark and sass.

She opens the door to find Mark standing at the entrance. Reece startles when she sees him but quickly regains her composure. She looks over to me, silently begging me to stay. “Make sure Miss Maxwell gets home safely,” I say to Mark.

“Yes, sir.” He gives me a knowing nod before closing the door and leaving me alone with my thoughts.

I walk over to the window and stare out into the dark night sky. There’s an alarming fire threatening to tear apart every single one of my self-imposed rules. The cause of my damnation is a breathtaking brunette with deep, soulful eyes.

Shit.

When it comes to Reece Maxwell, I think I’m in a world of trouble.

THE END

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[Power](#)

POWER

PROLOGUE

My phone rings and I look down at the number, sighing heavily. I know what's about to happen. "Hello, Sofia," I say as I lean against the kitchen counter.

"I need you to work tonight," she says in her normal, no-nonsense tone.

"You know I can't." I look down the hallway, seeing where Emily is.

Sofia breathes heavily into the phone. "I know you can't, but, consider it a massive favor to me."

"Sofia, I really can't."

"What if I increase your share?" I grind my teeth as I check for Emily. "Reece?"

"I'm still here. What's my cut?"

"I'll add an extra five grand." I sigh as I let my head roll back and stare up at the ceiling in the kitchen. "I really need you tonight."

"Fine," I say already hoping Tash is available to babysit for me.

"A car will come for you at six."

I look to the microwave for the time. "Fine," I grumble again.

"Thank you; you're a life-saver. By the way, this one is only for three hours."

"At least I'll be back by ten. I need to go."

"Thank you," Sofia says again.

"Yeah, yeah." I hang up, take a breath and call Tash.

"Hey," she says as she answers.

"Hey. Um, can you babysit tonight? Pretty please?"

"Oh, um, yeah, that should be okay. Work?"

"Uh-huh. Sofia called, and she's asked me to do a job."

“Sure, what time?”

“Can you be here by four?”

“Yeah, I can. But, seeing as this is so last minute, Emily and I are going bowling, and then we’re having pizza.”

I love my best friend, she’s so good to both Emily and me. I smile into the phone. “Thank you.”

“I have to go, so I’ll see you and Emily later.”

“Thank you.” I hang up, and head down the hallway to see what Emily’s up to. Opening her door, she’s laying on her bed completely immersed in a book. “What are you reading?”

“Harry Potter.” She shows me the book. “Have you read these?”

“Nope, but we’ve watched the movies.” I sit on the side of her bed. “I have some bad news.”

“You have to go to work, right? I heard you call Tash.” She sits up in bed, and places her book on her lap. “It’s okay. I get it.”

“I’m sorry. But I’ll make it up to you tomorrow.”

Emily shakes her head at me. “It’s okay, Mom. You have to work.” God, I love my kid, she’s just so understanding. Like an old soul instead of a ten-year-old.

“Tash is taking you out for bowling and pizza.”

“Yay!” Emily squeals with happiness. “Tash always lets me win at bowling.” She crinkles her brows, and stares at me. “Should I let her win tonight?”

“Hell no. Don’t go easy on her.” Emily smiles proudly. I feel terrible having to leave her when I only have her for the weekend. “Are you sure you’re okay with me going to work?”

“Mom, I know you have to work. Besides, the restaurant you work at must be really desperate if they’re calling you.” *Restaurant, right.* “So, it’s okay.”

I lean in and kiss her forehead. “How did I get so lucky to have a kid like you?”

“How did I get so lucky to have a mom like you?”

Guilt tears through me, because once she’s old enough to figure out what I do, I doubt she’s going to be so proud of me. “I need to start getting ready.”

“Okay.” Emily picks her book up, lays down again and opens it to the page she was on.

I head down to my room, and get into the shower.

— * —

“What are you going to wear?” Tash asks from the inside of my closet.

“No idea,” I call as I finish drying my hair. I walk out of my bathroom, and stand at the entrance of my massive closet. “I was thinking one of my black dresses.”

Tash looks over to the color-coded black section of the closet. She walks over, and runs through the hangers of all the black dresses. “This one?” She takes one out, and shows me.

I screw my mouth up, and shake my head. “Nah, I’m not feeling it.”

“Short or long?” Tash replaces the dress and keeps looking through them. I shrug my shoulders as I lean against the wall. “How are you going to do your make-up?”

“I think I might go dramatic. Smoky eye, red lips. What do you think?”

Tash turns, and casts a wary eye over my body. “Depends, what are you going to do with your hair?”

“What I usually do, soft curls and down. I’ll wear those shoes.” I look over to the racks of high heels and point to the pair I’ll wear.

“Which ones?” Tash turns and steps toward the racks. “These?” She points to the black high heels. “You always look good in these.” She takes the shoes, and returns to the black dresses. “I think these, and this dress.” Tash holds the heels against one of the black dresses. I start laughing. “What’s so funny.”

“You picked a dress that cost about two hundred dollars, as opposed to one of the others that costs ten or twenty times the amount.”

“Well, it’s hot.”

“Because it’s tight?”

“Because it draws attention to your boobs, and you have the best boobs ever. Must have something to do with being twenty-five. My boobs are saggy.”

“You’re only twenty-seven. You have good boobs too.”

Tash shakes her head and huffs. “These shoes, and this dress.”

“I guess.” I shrug. “Anyway, I’m going to curl my hair, and do my make-up.”

“I’m hungry,” Emily announces when she enters my room. She looks over at me and smiles. “What time are you going to work, Mom?”

Tash throws my decoy work clothes on the bed. “I’ll be leaving at about six.”

“How about you and I head into town and we can go bowling, then after bowling we can hit the pizza place?” Tash hugs Emily, as Emily nestles into Tash’s side.

“Yep.”

“Alright, go put your shoes on, and we’ll leave.”

Emily breaks out of the hug, comes over and gives me a kiss on the cheek. “Wake me when you get in.”

“Maybe. But tomorrow morning we’ll go out for pancakes.”

“Yay,” Tash announces enthusiastically. Emily giggles as she looks over to Tash. “What? I’m coming too.”

I give Emily a kiss. “Have fun with Tash tonight.”

“I will.” She turns and heads out of my room. “Have fun at work,” she calls over her shoulder as she leaves.

Tash’s brow arches as she mumbles, “I’m sure your mom will.”

“Hey,” I scold Tash as I stare at her.

“Well, come on, I’m sure you will.” She backs out of the room. “Be safe,” she says as she points to me.

“Always am.”

“Em and I are out of here.”

“Take care of my baby,” I say as I blow her a kiss of gratitude. Tash leaves, and I get ready for work.

—*—

Lucky for me, I live in a community where the houses aren’t too close to one another, and everyone minds their own business. So when a limousine arrives to pick me up, it’s not something out of the ordinary. The security gatehouse only needs to be informed when cars are about to arrive.

The black town car arrives, a man gets out of the passenger side, and approaches my front door. With my bag hanging over my elbow, I take my

keys off the hook, and step toward the door.

There's a knock before I get a chance to open it. "Miss Maxwell," the formal and stoic man says. "This way please."

"Thank you." He takes a step backward giving me enough room to lock the door. Once done, I follow him to the car. He holds the back door open for me, and I carefully slide in, making sure I daintily maneuver so I don't give him an eyeful of what I'm wearing under this tiny dress. "Thank you," I repeat once I'm in.

He closes the door, and returns to the front seat. I notice neither he nor the driver are talking, which isn't unusual when it comes to these transactions. They don't want to make it any more awkward than it already is.

I don't usually ask Sofia who the client is, because I actually trust her. Strange, considering the line of work I'm in. But, she's a good boss, and she's proven herself time and time again. She assesses and evaluates clients carefully, so I have total faith in her. I just wish I asked her who I was going to see tonight.

"Gift five minutes out," the guy sitting in the passenger seat says into his cuff.

I notice he's wearing an ear piece and I quietly let out a long breath. Great, another senator or chairman. *It pays the bills.*

"Gift three minutes out."

I straighten, as I fix my hair, and get myself mentally prepared for the next three hours.

Looking out my window, I take several deep breaths trying to calm the tension crackling through me. It doesn't matter how long I've been doing this, it still makes me nervous.

"Gift one minute out."

Closing my eyes, I clear my mind, take a deep breath, and prepare myself. When I open my eyes, I look out the window to find our destination.

My heart rate speeds and my stomach clenches. *What the actual fuck?*

The car pulls up to gates, and we're waved through. The driver slowly makes his way down the long driveway, and comes to an underground garage off to the left and behind the building. My mouth becomes parched, and my hand shakes as anxiety tears at my stomach.

The car comes to a stop, and the back door is flung open. "Miss Maxwell," another man announces. He holds his hand out to me as I extend mine, reaching for his. There's a nervous tingling in my feet and hands as I

notice how many men are gathering around, looking everywhere but at me. Funny thing is, they don't appear surprised or shocked by my presence.

The original guy is going through my bag while another waves a wand over my body, and professionally pats me down. "Gift is on her way." He hands me back my bag. "Ma'am." He indicates a door. "If you'd care to follow me."

My heart is beating so hard I can hear it thumping in my ears. The lead guy is walking with speed and determination. Even though I'm wearing five-inch heels, I manage to keep up with him. He looks back over his shoulder, and smirks when he sees I'm right behind him. I'm surrounded by a group of men, all quite intimidating, and none of them talking.

"This way, ma'am," he says as we reach an elevator. The doors to the elevator are already open, waiting for us. Only he and I enter.

I bring my hand up to my stomach, attempting to calm my nerves as the elevator feels like it's moving at the slowest speed. Shit, why did I accept this job tonight? Why did I have to say yes? *Get it together, Reece.*

The doors open, and I panic as I look around. I should tell him I can't do this, and ask him to take me home. *I can't do this.* I try to clear the massive lump sitting at the base of my throat, but it won't budge. "Ma'am," the guy says as he guides me down an opulent hallway. Below my shoes, the dark-gray carpet is thick, springy, and lavish. The walls have a textured navy blue wall paper adorning them from top to bottom. Bright artwork compliments the wide hallway, breaking up the dark floors and walls. "Ma'am." He opens the door to a room, and steps aside. The click of the door closing makes me startle.

"Fuck me," I mumble as I look around the bedroom. The room itself isn't anything too special. A huge four poster bed is up against the wall. Opposite the bed there are two doors. I take it one is the bathroom, and the other the closet. Clasp my hands together, I look around, wondering who's going to walk through the door.

I roam further into the bedroom, and place my bag on the bed. The air is stifling with anticipation as I anxiously pace looking at the artwork on the walls. It's so impersonal and unemotional. Though it must be worth a lot, it's still so *meh*.

The door opens, and I whip around to see the original guy standing to attention. "Sir," he says as he stands as tall as he possibly can.

My heart leaps into my throat as I hold my breath to see exactly who's

about to walk into the room.

“I don’t have time for that at the moment.” *He* strolls in holding his phone in one hand, while the other is shoved in the pocket of his suit pants.

Holy shit.

Fuck.

Fuck.

Double fuck shit fuck.

I stand taller, waiting for him to look at me. “I said I…” He lifts his chin and stops talking. “I’ll call you back.” With that, he hangs up and slides his phone into his suit jacket pocket. “Who are you?” he asks, his piercing gaze sears into my soul.

Get it together. “My name is Reece, Mr. President,” I say as I step forward and extend my hand for him to shake.

“Reece?” He folds his arms against his chest and taps his finger against his mouth as he stares at me.

“Yes, sir.” I lower my hand, and take a step backward.

Mr. President doesn’t move. His tall, slim frame stands staring at me. “Where’s Mary?”

“I’m sorry, sir, but she was unable to make it tonight.”

“Why am I the last one to hear about this?” he snaps at me with a dissatisfied tone.

His harsh attitude kind of throws me. “I don’t know why you’re the last one to hear about this. Maybe ask whoever’s been organizing your meetings.” Oh shit, what the fuck did I just say? I clear my throat and avert my gaze for a few seconds. “I apologize, Mr. President. I can leave and let Sofia know you only want Mary.”

“Who’s Sofia?”

I roll my eyes closed, feeling like a totally idiot that I’d expect someone like the President of America to know who Sofia is. “My apologies, Mr. President. There seems to have been a miscommunication somehow.” I walk over to the bed, and pick my bag up. Standing taller, I hold my head up, and try to save myself from any further embarrassment.

“What are you doing?” He darts his hand out and grabs my arm. Heat emanates from him. Stopping, I meet his hardened stare before slowly lowering my eyes down to where his hand is gripping my arm. My chest is heaving with mixed emotions of disbelief and excitement. Gently, he unwinds his fingers from my arm. “I should be the one to apologize,” he says.

“Please, stay.” He steps back, and offers me a small smile.

“Of course.” I walk further into the room, and return my bag to the bed.

“Would you care for a drink?”

“No, thank you, Mr. President.”

In the corner of the room, there’s a sideboard with a range of refreshments, from chilled water to champagne in a fancy ice bucket. He pours himself a scotch and leaves it on the sideboard as he takes his beautifully crafted suit jacket off and loosens his tie. “Tell me about yourself,” he says as he picks the scotch glass up and walks over to sit on the edge of the bed.

“What would you like to know?”

“How old are you?” He lifts the glass to his lips and takes a small sip.

“I’m twenty-five, sir.” Usually, I know exactly what’s going to happen because I have regular clients, but this is a whole new ball game, and Sofia should’ve given me the heads-up.

“Twenty-five?”

I nod. “Yes, sir.”

He throws back the remainder of the scotch, stands and walks over to the sideboard where he pours another drink for himself. “You clearly know who I am.”

Where’s he going with this? “Of course.”

“Have you signed a NDA?”

Internally I roll my eyes, because seriously, does he think he’s the only famous person I’ve done this with. “It’s a requirement at the agency, sir.”

“You can’t discuss this, not with anyone.”

“I’m aware.”

“What happens here stays here.”

“Yes, sir, I know.”

“Who else have you been with?”

I cock a brow at his question. “Who have you been with?” I ask feeling a bit cocky, yet also annoyed at this personal question.

“I beg your pardon?” He stands taller, trying to intimidate me.

“I don’t discuss clients with other clients.”

He blinks several times, obviously not liking my reply. “I’m the President.”

“Yes, sir, you are. But don’t ask me for any personal information on my clients, because I won’t give it to you.”

His expression is hard and unreadable. He's giving me nothing, not a single thing. "Who have you been with?" he repeats the question.

I shake my head. "I'm not discussing that with you."

"I can bring the Secret Service in here and have them interrogate you. Or, I could bring the whole weight of my office down on your agency and find out every single one of your past clients."

I wet my lips, and take a breath. "I have no idea what arrangements you have with Mary. But I don't discuss clients." I smile and continue, "If you want me to tell you about my clients, then be prepared for me to tell those clients about you."

He strides over swiftly and grips my upper arms, his fingers deliciously digging in. "You'll speak to no one of me." He stares down at my lips. His body is so close to mine, I can feel his rock-hard cock straining against my figure-hugging dress.

My chest is heaving with shock and, surprisingly, desire. God, I want him to kiss me. I want his mouth on mine. "I speak to no one of anything," I say while I watch him staring at my lips.

He steps in closer, tightens his hold on my arms and lowers his head. I can feel his warm breath on me. "Who have you been with?" he repeats, even slower.

There's an ache pulsating between my legs. A slow, torturous energy is rising between us. I wet my lips again, knowing he can't take his eyes off my mouth. "None of your business," I say with a resolute strength. "Just because you're the president doesn't give you the right to know about my clients." I try to pull away, but he strengthens his grip on me again. I'm hungry for the pain. I know he's going to leave soft bruising on my arms.

"It gives me every right."

I stand staring at him, refusing to look away from his dark brown eyes. "Perhaps I'm not the woman you need tonight."

He smashes his mouth to mine, claiming me while he walks me backward toward the bed. When the backs of my knees find the bed, he stops kissing me. Stepping back, he looks me up and down. "Take the dress off. Leave the shoes on." I shimmy out of the dress, and toss it to the floor. "Fuck," he says as he stares at my body wearing a matching black thong and black bra. "Twirl around." He indicates with his finger before crossing his arms in front of his chest.

I smirk and slowly turn, making sure I stick my butt out as I take my time

to perform for him. I look over my shoulder, making sure to elongate my spine and tilt my head back. It's obvious he likes what he sees, because the bulge in his pants is now quite prominent. He watches me carefully, his eyes all over my body. I make a full circle, and seductively nibble on my bottom lip. He can't keep his eyes off my mouth. I bring my hand up, and with the tip of my finger, run it over my lower lip before sucking on the tip.

He gulps, though he continues watching like a starving man who's seen his favorite food served in front of him. "What is it you want from me, *Mr. President?*" I sit on the edge of the bed, and spread my legs so he can see everything. I slide my hand inside my thong, and rub my fingers over my wet pussy. "Do you want to taste me?" I lift my fingers, and coat my lips with my own desire. "Or would you like me on my knees?" I sink off the bed to my knees, slightly part my mouth and look up at him. "What do you want?" I pinch my nipples through my bra, as I wait for his answer. "Or, do you prefer to watch?"

He unzips his pants, and steps toward me. He laces his hand through my hair, and stabs his hard cock into my mouth. He thrusts hard into me, fucking my mouth with vigor and passion. "That's it, take it all," he says in a rough voice as he relentlessly clamps onto my hair and ravages my mouth with his thick, hard cock. I use my tongue to flick the head, but his fingers strengthen, as he pumps his veiny cock down my throat over and over again. "Such a good girl," he says with a tight voice.

I knead his balls, playing with them as his hips speed up. He's close; he's about to come hard. He pulls out of my mouth, grabs his cock, and tugs on it once. Ribbons of his cum flow out onto the bed. I watch as he closes his eyes and grunts while his cock spurts. A part of me is grateful he did that, because one of Sofia's rule is that bodily fluids are never exchanged, but another part of me wishes I was on the receiving end.

When he finishes, he opens his eyes and sighs. Holding his hand out to me, he helps me up. "Thank you," he says before tucking his cock into his pants, and zipping up. "You can leave."

"You want me to leave?" Usually, men pay me to do more than just suck them off.

He turns away and grabs the second drink he poured. "Yes, you can leave." Well, talk about weird. But, okay. He *is* the client, and whatever the client wants, the client gets. Within reason, of course. I pick my dress up, and wiggle into it. "Why are you smiling?"

I turn to look at him. “Pardon?”

“You were smiling, why?”

“I was thinking, that’s all.”

“About?”

“Um. Usually my clients want more,” I say choosing my words carefully.

He leans against the wall, smirking as he sips on his scotch. He gives me a small nod as he watches me. “Thank you for your time.”

He’s paying for it. “Have a good night,” I say as I grab my bag and head toward the door.

When I open it, the original guy is standing right there. He looks in, and the President says, “Make sure Miss Maxwell gets home safely.”

“Yes, sir.” He gives the President a nod, and closes the door behind me.

The whole ride home is silent and surreal. Like the interlude with the leader of the free world didn’t even happen.

The main guy comes into the house with me, and checks every room before heading to the door. Thankfully, Tash and Emily haven’t returned yet, or that would’ve been one awkward conversation to have with Tash. And that could’ve scared Emily, having a big, burly guy in a black suit checking the house out. “Good night, ma’am.”

“Good night,” I reply as I smile.

He walks out and I close and lock the door behind him. I lean against the cold wood, still unsure about what happened.

I just gave the President of the United States a blow job.

Well, fuck me.

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