



Revisions

Author: *J.A. Armstrong*

Category: Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: It's the midpoint of Candace Reid's first presidential term, and the stakes have never been higher. Political adversary Lawson Klein is poised to announce his candidacy, vowing to challenge Candace in the next election. With control of Congress hanging in the balance as the midterms approach, threats continue to brew at home and abroad.

As Candace navigates the relentless pressures of governing America and maintaining global leadership, her wife, Jameson, juggles the demands of family life and political advocacy—all within the confines of what she calls the world's biggest "mouse house." Jonathan Fletcher, Candace's ex-husband, battles terminal cancer, further complicating their already demanding lives.

Separated by duty but united by love, Candace and Jameson draw strength from each other while discovering unexpected sources of support. Told through their alternating perspectives, *Revisions* offers an intimate glimpse into the challenges of their partnership, their evolving family, and their hopes for the future.

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Chapter One

Jameson

I've never quite understood people's fascination with me—other than to wonder how I captured someone like Candace. Most people I meet imagine my life as the spouse of the President of the United States to be filled with perks and luxury. I'll admit it does come with its advantages. I don't have to do Cooper's laundry, and I can call the kitchen for a meal whenever I want. The White House is filled with amenities, but none of them compare to the freedom of taking a walk alone or being able to order pizza delivery without any advance notice. Please don't get me wrong; I don't regret the life I've chosen. It's hardly the one I pictured when I arrived at Senator Candace Fletcher's doorstep ten years ago.

I arrived intending to win the senator over with my professional skills, hoping to land a fun project to remodel her historic home. The last thing I expected was a remodel of my life. Falling in love wasn't on my to-do list. If I've learned anything these past ten years, it's to expect the unexpected. I'll let you in on a secret I don't share with many people. I knew my life was about to change when Candace opened her door. I can't say I imagined being married to the President of the United States, raising a nine-year-old, and being a grandmother that first day. I knew I wanted to be with Candace, and I've never looked back.

I'm likely the most unlikely First Lady in history. I'm sure Martha Washington never envisioned a pair of lesbians roaming these halls. And I seriously doubt that Jackie Kennedy thought one of her successors would wander the corridors in jeans and a tool belt on the way to tinker with the sink in the president's bathroom. Or maybe

they did. Who knows? The longer I'm here, the more I understand what it takes to make this place tick. I don't mean the White House. I mean the country.

Candace left yesterday to spend a few days on the campaign trail with congressional hopefuls. I'm headed to give an interview to a "viral" podcaster. I asked Shell if I should wear a mask. She didn't find my question funny. I suppose podcast appearances are cheaper than renting a billboard to blast our family secrets. I don't dislike talking to people. I still worry I'll say something that will cause Candace issues. For example, the name of this podcast is The Late Great America. What on earth does that even mean? The Late Great America? I expect he'll ask me about that: America in days gone by. Shell assured me she made clear what questions were off-limits. That sounds great. Shell can't control what happens in an interview. That much, I know.

"Hey."

Dana. I should feel guilty that Candace lost her biggest asset. Dana worked for Candace for over twenty years. But in this case, the president's loss is the first lady's gain, and I'm happy for the win. Dana is a pro. No. Dana is the pro for handling the press and shaping public perception. She resisted Shell's idea of me doing this interview.

"Hey, Dana."

"Nervous?" she asks.

"No. You know what Candace would say," I offer.

"Ah. You're aware."

"Aware that I need to be on alert," I tell her. "You didn't want Shell to set this up.

You still haven't told me the reason."

"Jay Ivey is unpredictable, JD. He likes to stir the pot."

"Great." She means the shit pot.

"You can handle him."

"Uh-huh. Candace could handle him."

Dana laughs. "If I didn't think you could field whatever he throws at you, you wouldn't be doing this," she says.

I wish I had Dana's confidence. Usually, we prepare for interviews and appearances. The last few weeks have moved at a maddening pace. Candace's schedule is always demanding. Campaign season only adds to that. I've been on kid duty. Not that I'm complaining. I make time every morning to be in my office, but honestly, I function more as support for my staff. They're incredibly capable and energetic. Candace and I agreed when she sought the presidency that my priority would be the family. I haven't had time to review podcasts. Maybe it would be more accurate to admit I didn't have any inclination to make time to watch *The Late Great America*. I probably should have.

"JD, come on. You're a pro."

I laugh.

"You are," Dana assures me. "Just be yourself."

"Mm. Tell me something."

“If I can.”

“What do you think this Jason Ivey hopes to get out of our conversation?” I’m genuinely curious.

“Exposure.”

“Great.”

“JD, at the end of the day, that’s what they all want,” Dana says.

I’ve learned a lot from Candace over the years. It might sound cynical to say everyone has an agenda, but it’s not—it’s just the truth. That doesn’t mean every agenda is sinister. At its core, an agenda is simply a purpose.

When Cooper and Spencer shuffle into my office, looking sheepish, they have an agenda. Maybe they’re hoping I’ll take them somewhere or grant permission for something Candace would likely refuse. Candace has an agenda whenever she calls a meeting—usually, it’s to get honest information.

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I've also learned that, in Candace's circle, the wordagendais always met with a degree of skepticism. Because around here, someone's purpose isn't just a goal—it's a motive worth questioning. I shake my head as we approach my office.

Dana grabs my arm. "JD, I've been at this a long time. Consider this as prep for something more invasive."

Dana makes this interview sound like a colonoscopy. I'm tempted to ask if I can get a sedative first.

"I'm afraid to ask what you're thinking," Dana says.

"I'm reminded why youarethe best."

"What?"

"That was the nicest way I've ever been told to expect something to land squarely up my ass," I say.

Dana stares at me for a second and then laughs.

"You realize you can just tell me the truth?" I ask.

"I told you it's prep."

"For a colonoscopy?"

“Only you would make that comparison,” Dana replied.

“Prep for something moreinvasive?”

Dana chuckles.

“Your words, not mine,” I remind her as we stop just before the door. I turn to Dana and grin. “You owe me dinner after this, and Shell owes me babysitting.”

“Why?”

“Candace says the worst part is always the prep,” I tell her. With a deep breath, I take the final steps into my office. If nothing else, this should be interesting.

“Ms. Reid. Thank you for agreeing to this conversation,” Ivey begins.

“No need to thank me. And it’s JD.”

“Informality isn’t exactly customary here,” Ivey says.

“Do you mean in the White House?” I ask.

“Yes.”

If only he knew. I hold back a chuckle.

“We’re not in theWestWing,” I reply. “And I’m not an elected official.”

“Howwouldyou define your role?” he asks.

I want to laugh. Candace would tell him I’m the First Lunatic. “It depends on what

you're asking," I tell him.

"You don't have thoughts on your role?"

I have many thoughts about my role. "Sure," I reply. "There are duties assigned to the First Lady's office, mostly ceremonial. There are also expectations as the spouse of any politician."

"And those differ?" Ivey asks.

"I think we all play various roles at home and work. Don't you?"

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“This is my role,” Ivey says. “Pretty straightforward.”

“You mean showing up and asking questions?” I ask him.

Ivey smiles.

I’m not sure where he’s going with this line of questioning. “All you do is show up and ask questions?” I ask. “You must do research first.”

“I do.”

“And you have to market your show.”

“I have a team,” he says.

“So do I. I’m part of that team. This is part of what I do as First Lady—talk to people.”

“You’re not a typical First Lady.”

I laugh. “What gave it away?” I ask. Candace and I had a colorful conversation about tool belts before she left. I think I’ll leave that out.

“Aside from the nature of your relationship?” Ivey asks.

Oh, boy. Here it comes. The nature of your relationship. Does he think this is the first time I’ve been asked this question? Not very original, Jay. “I’m only one in a long line of women to become First Lady,” I reply.

“But the only one married to a woman.”

“True.”

“You must admit, it is a stark departure from your predecessors,” Ivey comments.

It would probably be ill-advised for me to roll my eyes. Does he know about Eleanor Roosevelt? Something tells me more than one First Lady kissed a girl. “Being married?” I quip.

“Being a lesbian.”

I smile. What does he want me to say? I’m sorry? This interview is beginning to bore me.

“You’ve said publicly that you take that role seriously,” Ivey says.

I’m tempted to ask if he means being a lesbian or being married to one. Dana catches my eye—also, not a good idea.

“What did you mean by that?” Ivey asks. “The president has said her sexuality should have no bearing on her viability as a candidate or a leader. Yet you say you take your role as a lesbian and First Lady seriously. That seems like a departure from her agenda.”

Her agenda? There was a time when people like this podcaster made me want to reply with a string of expletives and insults. Now, I find it tiresome and pathetic. I was fortunate. To say that my coming out lacked fanfare is an understatement. Then again, I never really had a coming out. The truth is my parents had figured it out before I ever thought to tell them I was a lesbian. They didn’t react at all when I brought a girl home. No joyful hugs. No tearful disappointment. And no angry

accusations. My mom said hello, offered my girlfriend something to drink, and asked about her studies. And my dad? He just told her to make sure I didn't exist perpetually on lousy pizza. That was it. That doesn't mean I'm a stranger to judgment.

I would have expected more blowback from my dad's family. He's the Republican in the House, after all. No one—and I mean no one—on my dad's side said a word. And if you want my opinion, that's how I think it should be. They were always excited to meet the girl I was dating. They bombarded my girlfriends with questions and told embarrassing stories about me. They never made an issue of the fact that the person I brought home was a woman—not once. Nothing changed from the handful of jocks I dated in high school to the sorority women I dated in college.

My mother's family was a different story. When I told my cousin Craig that I was gay, he laughed and said he had known since I was in first grade. Then he started calling me the rainbow sheep of the family. If I'm the rainbow sheep, my mom is the proverbial black sheep. Like me, she has two brothers. It's funny how history repeats itself. She's always been more progressive in her views on politics and life than the rest of her family, but she learned to pick her battles carefully—until my uncle began his verbal abuse towards me. Everything changed after that. Both of my uncles liked to make comments—indirectly—about me. It started when I went to college. I always understood, on some level, that they resented my ability to attend Cornell.

My mom saved as much as possible so my brothers and I could get a college education. Toby and Doug both opted for community college. After two years, Doug transferred to NYU. Toby opened a drywall business and worked on projects with my dad until he found his footing. For a long time, I thought the not-so-affectionate teasing about my academic career was about Cornell. It took me years to understand that was only part of it.

I'm the only granddaughter on my mom's side of the family. It didn't seem like an

issue when I was small—playing tag and even touch football with my brothers and cousins. After all, I wore a dress to my Confirmation and went to the prom with a football player. But things started to change when my mom proudly announced that I'd been accepted to Cornell. It was like my uncles were saying, "How dare she get that chance?" I worked for the opportunity. I studied and competed in sports. My parents helped with my undergraduate studies. I wouldn't have been able to choose Cornell if I hadn't gotten a few scholarships.

For a long time, I thought all the negativity directed at me stemmed from grief over my cousin Craig's death as well as objections to my coming out as a lesbian. I accepted the nastiness for years because of my guilt. My cousins, Craig, Scott, and I were inseparable for most of our lives until high school. Unlike many of my friends and cousins, I didn't party. I was too busy being a closeted overachiever. Craig and Scott started spending more time together at parties. They got carried away with drinking and drugs and took it to the extreme one night when they broke into a neighbor's house. Both their fathers are cops. You can imagine how that went over in my family.

I pulled away from them more after that until they both got sober. They were doing great the summer before I left for college. We spent most of that summer working on projects with my dad for extra cash. I thought we were all on track. But after I left for college, they fell back into the party scene—Craig, most of all. He overdosed one night. I spent a lot of years angry at Scott. The truth is, I wondered if they would have gone down that road again if I'd stayed home. It's silly. But my guilt made it easy for me to accept Uncle Jerry's attitude towards me.

My Uncle Jerry was always a hard ass. He made Craig's life hell more than once. But as kids, you don't think too much about it. Craig spent as much time as he could with my parents.

Looking back, it's clear my uncles resented my mom. They both went straight from

high school into police work. My mom worked her way through college, and my dad helped her pay for her master's degree.

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Jay Ivey's questions trigger feelings about my youth. Being the only girl in my family wasn't easy for me. There were expectations. I defied them. Jerry resented my success academically and professionally, just like he did my mom's. He also had issues with my sexuality. I went to great lengths to suppress who I was—not only to keep it a secret. It didn't matter that I never shared my interest in girls with anyone. Being the jock who never expressed crushes on boys led to loads of rumors about me in high school. My solution was to date Jed Tyler. He was older, popular, and interested in me. And dating Jed was more than a way to conceal my feelings about girls. I think part of me hoped he could change me. He changed things for me.

I tried to push Jed away one night during a make-out session in his car. His response was to assert that the rumors must be true—I was a lesbian. I am. That isn't why I pushed him away. I wasn't ready to be sexually active with anyone. He didn't care about that or understand the meaning of the word no. After that night, part of me shut down. I withdrew into my studies more. Eventually, I discovered the excitement of dating women. But I never felt safe when one of my girlfriends would touch me. I never trusted anyone's touch until I met Candace.

So, yes. Being the first lesbian First Lady means something to me. When kids tell me that seeing me and Candace helped them be comfortable with themselves, it means something to me. It also means something to me when a parent tells me we've helped them accept their child's sexuality. It matters. People like Ivey piss me off. He reminds me of Jerry and Jed.

I take a deep breath and answer him. "I think you're taking Candace's words out of context," I say.

“They are her words.”

“Sure. The fact that she’s a lesbian shouldn’t be a reason to vote for or against her. It also shouldn’t be qualifying or disqualifying as a leader.”

“Then why does it matter to you?” he asks.

“You answered your question when you posed it to me,” I tell him.

“You haven’t answered it.”

“I did. The fact that you would think of asking me that question is the answer. Lesbians and gay men are listening to this conversation. No matter their age, they’ve never seen someone from their community sitting in the White House.”

“So, it matters as a signal to your community. There are many people uncomfortable with the fact that lesbians live here,” he says.

I catch Dana’s cringe in the distance. That comment sounds exactly like something my Uncle Jerry would say. There was a time when this line of questioning infuriated me; now, I find it pathetic and tired. I’m tempted to suggest it would make a great reality show: *Lesbians Live Here*. I’d watch it. I’ll leave that out, too.

I nod. “That’s also why I take my role seriously, Jay. I hope when people get to know me—when they get to know Candace and our family—it helps them realize we’re no different. Life here is different from theirs. It’s a bubble. We’re never alone—not really. But our marriage and our family are like everyone else’s. We just live in an extraordinary reality for the next few years.”

“How do you feel about possibly being here for two terms? You had a successful career before you met the president. Any regrets?”

“No regrets,” I answer.

“There have been rumors that you and the president don’t agree on many issues,” Ivey says.

“Is that a question?”

“Do you challenge the president?”

“Daily.”

“Really?”

I laugh. “Not on policy,” I explain.

“Even if you disagree?”

“I trust Candace to make the best decisions in any situation. Occasionally, I do scold her about ice cream flavors.”

“But not political issues? You never express a difference of opinion?”

I’m sure it’s hard for most people to believe this, but Candace and I don’t talk about her policies often. We have different backgrounds and experiences. Of course, we sometimes disagree. I will never grasp why that surprises people. “If I feel strongly about something, I tell her,” I reply.

“So you’re not a political person? The president doesn’t share her thoughts with you?”

“Jay, the president is my wife.”

“Exactly.”

I chuckle. “You’re missing my point. You see Candace Reid as the president. Everything you think about her starts with her career as a political leader. I see her as Candace. Serving as president is part of her. She’s also my best friend, someone’s sister, daughter, and mother. We have four kids and eight grandchildren, and another is on the way. Trust me, we have plenty to discuss.”

I can see the wheels spinning in Ivey’s brain. He’s determined to get under my skin.

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“One might say the president’s focus is split.”

“They might,” I agree.

“So you agree.”

“That Candace’s focus is split?”

Jay Ivey nods.

“I’m not part of her administration, Jay. I know that countless issues land on her desk daily.”

“And some of those are family-related, are they not?”

“Sure.”

“Splitting her focus.”

My patience is wearing thin.

“Candace is hardly the first president to have a large family,” I remind him. “I think being a mother and grandmother is her biggest asset as a leader.”

Ivey smirks. Smug. He’s trying to bait me. It won’t work. I wait patiently for a question.

“We’ve all heard about the president’s compassion.”

“That’s an asset, too. Candace didn’t become compassionate because she had kids. She wanted a family because of her compassion.”

“Leading a nation isn’t the same as child rearing,” he says.

What a misogynistic ass. The most pathetic thing about men like Ivey is they think they’re clever. He hasn’t asked me one original question. It’s pathetic.

“Ms. Reid,” he urges me.

“I’m sorry. Did you ask me a question?”

“Do you believe running the most powerful country in the world is the same as managing a family?” he asks.

I know how Candace would reply.

“Do you have a big family, Jay?” I ask.

“I don’t see how that matters.”

“Humor me.”

“I have two brothers and a sister,” he says.

“And do they always agree?”

“Of course not.”

“You should ask your mother how she manages to keep the peace on holidays,” I advise.

“We know what’s expected from us,” he says.

“Mm. She set boundaries.”

He nods.

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“Well, Candace would tell you that managing world leaders and politicians requires setting clear expectations and boundaries.”

“Hardly the same.”

“You don’t think so?” I ask.

“No. I don’t.”

“Interesting,” I say.

“I don’t think motherhood and commanding the world’s largest economy and military are similar,” Ivey says. “I love my mother. I don’t think her dinnertime expectations qualify her to lead a nation.”

I shrug.

“You disagree,” he chimes.

“I think knowing how to manage different personalities and help them negotiate through conflicts determines any leader’s success.”

“And you believe solving an argument over a toy or a dinner table squabble compares to dealing with dictators and legislators? You need more than compassion.”

“You do. It requires determination and confidence. Squabbles are squabbles, Mr. Ivey. Everyone thinks their motivations are justified. It makes negotiation tricky. It

also makes accountability difficult. I wouldn't underestimate how managing the personalities and disagreements in a family strengthens the skill to navigate politics," I tell him.

He's ready to pounce. I continue before he has the chance.

"Candace was a lawyer, congresswoman, senator, and governor before she sought the presidency. She has more collective experience than nearly anyone who's held the job. Parenthood is part of her experience. I'm not sure what you hope I'll say. No. I don't agree with every decision Candace makes—not as a parent or the president. One thing people should value about their president is the ability to allow for respectful disagreement. I also know Candace doesn't arrive at decisions without careful consideration. She cares about outcomes, Mr. Ivey."

"Love conquers all? Even the White House?" he asks sarcastically.

"I'd like to believe it can. Ego tends to get in the way," I say. "No. Love doesn't conquer every problem. That would be ideal. You asked me about my career."

"I did. I think most people would struggle to place their ambitions aside indefinitely."

"Maybe some people would. Do you know what I did before Candace became the president?"

"Of course. You ran a successful architectural firm."

"I built it," I correct him. "From the ground up—just like the plans I design for buildings. I learned a bit about dealing with conflict and managing expectations along the way. Do you know why I love architecture?"

"Tell me."

“People marvel at the artistry of buildings. They enjoy the intricacies and ornate features of buildings. Ancient wonders and modern marvels,” I explain.

He appears bewildered, wondering where I am directing our conversation.

“I enjoy the artistry of structures, too. It’s one reason I was attracted to architecture.”

“One reason?” he probes.

“It’s no secret I spent a lot of time with my dad on construction projects. I loved to watch a project come together from the ground up. Finesse crumbles without support, Mr. Ivey. Any structure that hopes to bear the weight of time starts with a solid foundation.”

“I’m sure you have a point,” Ivey interjects.

“I do. Most people look at Candace’s finesse. Do you know what I mean by that? They judge her on her speeches and appearance. That’s the finesse. What she possesses is a solid foundation. She knows who she is and what she believes. Just like the buildings I design, she weathers strain and pressure because she has that foundation, and she also has support.

“I’ve walked through many homes with my dad. The owner had a great idea about knocking out walls for more space or better aesthetics. And many of those ideas were great. But after you build a foundation, you need to reinforce it with support. If you destroy part of something, you have to ensure it’s not critical to the overall structure.”

He’s glassy-eyed. Candace has taught me many things beyond an appreciation for scripture. She’s the master. I’m still a student. But I’ve always been a quick study. I smile.

“Family is foundational for Candace and me,” I tell him. “Is it hard for me to set aside my work? Sure. My family is my home. And my marriage is the foundation. I admire what Candace has accomplished. Sometimes, it frustrates me. Not the time that it demands of her. The toll it takes, and the way people question her motives. I don’t know what you hope to discover today. I don’t have any secrets for you to uncover. I’m just someone who is lucky enough to have found the love of my life. It took me longer than some. I can’t change what you think about lesbians in the White House or how you view Candace as your president. She sacrifices more than anyone realizes to serve in that role. She gives it everything she has—that much, I can assure you. You don’t have to like her or me. You don’t have to accept or understand our life.

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“I told you I challenge her daily. Sometimes, that’s with debate and humor; sometimes, I make her crazy by climbing ladders. That isn’t a metaphor.”

I catch Dana giggling in the corner.

“I understand your podcast is called The Late Great America,” I say.

“It is.”

“Is that because you think America was better in the past?”

“Don’t you?”

“I think it was different,” I reply. “And I think every generation has entertained the idea that things were better in the past. Some things were. But it’s easy to romanticize what’s behind you or in front of you.”

“Is that what the president thinks?” Ivey asks.

“I don’t know. I’ll have to ask her. It’s what I believe.”

I glance over at Dana and back at Jay Ivey. He’s young. I’d guess he’s in his early thirties. It makes me wonder what part of the past he envisions would be better in the future. I admit I often think life was better before everyone married their screens. I went to dinner with my brother Doug and his kids a few months ago. My nephew spent the entire dinner wearing headphones while watching something on a tablet. I must’ve shown my irritation because Doug sighed and said it’s no different from

giving a kid a coloring book. I didn't argue. I also disagree. I think it's healthy for kids to hear adult conversations and learn to be part of it. You can still participate while you color. Busy hands don't cause deaf ears. Change doesn't always equate to progress. But I think people are often so uncomfortable with change that they fail to notice how progress has helped them.

Being raised by a history teacher and married to a world leader demands that I have some knowledge of history. Although I may have spent more time working with my dad when I was younger, I always loved to listen to my mom talk about her lessons or debate with my father about politics. My mother is one of the smartest, funniest, and most thoughtful people you'll ever meet—kind of like Candace. I know, “You always marry a woman like your mother.” If that were true, there wouldn't be so many mother-in-law jokes.

My mom and Candace have a lot in common.

Ivey's gaze narrows. “Does the president care about the past?”

“She's a student of history,” I reply.

“Is she?”

“She is. Believe me, I should know. My mother was a high school history teacher. Candace has a pile of books on the table beside the bed.”

“About history?” he asks.

“Some. Lots of biographies, too. Occasionally, she enjoys thrillers.”

Candace just finished a book about an international conspiracy to overthrow the president. When I told her she might want to take notes for her memoir, she threw the

book at me.

“But she doesn’t see the value in history,” Ivey says.

“You’re asking me to speak for her. She sees value in the lessons of history and its influence.”

Dana clears her throat and raises a hand. That means Mr. Ivey gets a final question.

“Let me ask you one final question,” he says.

“Sure.”

“You can’t speak for the president. But what do you hope she leaves for a future America?”

“I think she hopes people will have more opportunities, be healthier, more secure, and more hopeful.”

I exchange formal pleasantries with Ivey, nod to Dana, and leave my office. I don’t know what Jay Ivey hoped to accomplish with that conversation. And I’m not clear on why Shell pushed for the interview. I expect he’ll carve up my answers and post a handful of unique outtakes on social media. I doubt what he shares will be complimentary. I’ll get the credit from Shell for being respectful. Candace will get hammered by someone for something I said.

“Hey,” Dana calls out.

“I thought you’d be wrapping things up.”

“Dee will handle it,” Dana says. “You look annoyed.”

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“No. I don’t know why Shell pushed for this. It doesn’t take a genius to know he’s not batting for Team Candace.”

“No. But it’s good?—”

“Practice?”

Dana shrugs.

“We both know he’ll edit that into something he can use to assault her character.”

“We’ll see.”

I laugh. “You think so, too.”

“I think the next two years will get messy, JD.”

No doubt. “I hate it.”

“Being here?”

“No,” I reply. “Sometimes, Dana, the way people treat Candace pisses me off. I hate that my hands are tied.”

“You’d like to take a few swings.”

“Yeah. I would.”

“I get it,” Dana says.

“How have you done it all these years?” I ask.

“What’s that?”

“Well, Candace is like your mom. You’ve had to field ugly questions and fight back accusations against her longer than me.”

“It’s how I protect her,” Dana explains. “And it’s how I’ll protect you.”

“I don’t need protection from assholes.”

“No, but they might from you.”

I look at Dana, and we laugh.

“Have you talked to Candace today?” Dana wonders.

“Not since this morning.”

“She hasn’t called?”

“She left me a message. I think she’s looking forward to this trip.”

“A chance to press the flesh,” Dana observes.

“And to be away. She’ll steal a few moments of solitude on the plane. And she’ll have Cassidy with her tomorrow.”

“Are you worried about her?”

“No more than I always am.” And I am always concerned for Candace.

“JD, we’ve known each other alongtime. I can read you. Something is on your mind, and it’s more than The Late Great America podcast.”

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Dana can read me. She can also read Candace better than most people. I think that's what makes her so great at communication—not only helping Candace find her voice or speaking on behalf of Candace. She's also able to see through the masks people wear. Cassidy has the same ability. And as much as it might surprise some people, so does Shell. Shell's bravado sometimes maskshertalents.

“JD?”

“Aw, hell, Dana. If you want to know the truth, it pisses me off.”

“I assume you mean the way things went just now.”

“There are times I hate taking the high road. And that isn't my talent.”

“What are you talking about?” Dana asks.

“Talking.”

“Come again?”

“Talking,” I repeat. “You allthinkI'm an asset to Candace.”

“You are.”

“Maybe. Not when it comes totalking. Listening. I'm good at listening. You, Shell, Cassidy—God knows, Candace—you can read people. You anticipate what's coming before it's thrown at you, and you already have an answer.”

Dana pulls me into the elevator that leads upstairs.

“When is Cooper coming home?” Dana asks.

“He’s staying the night at Cassidy’s. He’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

“Good.”

“Good?” I ask.

“Yes. That means we have time for a round of truth?—”

“Or dare?” I ask.

“Ha-ha. No. Idareyou to tell me the truth over some of Candace’s scotch.”

I can’t help but laugh. Dana knows better than most that I’m not much of a drinker. And Dana is still on medication, so scotch will have to stay in the cabinet for now. I won’t tell Dana the last time I drank a little too much, I struggled to get out of my jeans and landed on the bedroom floor. Dana has known me since college. I don’t think she’s ever seen me drunk—tipsy, maybe. It leaves me to wonder what she wants to talk about that might require alcohol.

“What do you want to ask me that you think demands alcohol?” I ask.

Dana sighs. “Maybe it’s me who could use a drink.”

“Or three?”

“Or thirty,” Dana deadpans.

I burst out laughing. The elevator opens to the residence, and I nod to Agent Morrow. He probably wonders if we're already drunk.

"It can't be that bad," I say as I lead Dana toward the kitchen.

"The kitchen?" Dana asks.

I shrug as I open the freezer. "Candace swears by ice cream. It's her alternative to scotch."

"I've heard."

A few days ago, Candace complained that her pants felt tight. I couldn't help but chuckle. Ice cream is her presidential addiction. Don't misunderstand. Candace has always enjoyed a sundae, and there has never been a time when our freezer wasn't stocked with a few pints of ice cream. Ice cream is something of a bond between her and Coop. The first time we visited him before the adoption was a thought; we took him with Spencer for ice cream. Since then, it's become a meeting place for Candace and Coop.

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Candace enjoys a few glasses of wine or a glass of scotch. She rarely indulges in opening a bottle of wine or scotch since she became the president. At least she doesn't indulge in more than a glass or a sip. She can't risk clouding her focus. My thoughts travel to a conversation I had with Shell recently:

"Maybe I should grab another bottle of wine," Shell suggested.

"I think one is fine," I offered.

"I don't know. You know Mom. After a long day, she likes to relax with a few drinks. Plus, Cass is here."

"If you intend to have a few glasses, open another bottle. Otherwise, one is enough."

"Why does Mom have a call later or something?"

"Shell," I said. "Have you noticed how your mother drinks a glass of wine?"

"What? Mom is always saying she'll grab another bottle."

"Yes. But she seldom opens it unless someone else is drinking it," I said.

"JD, I know Mom isn't an alcoholic."

I laughed. I'd bet there are many days she wishes she could drown in a bottle.

"Why is that funny?" Michelle asked.

“It’s not—not really.” I sighed. “Shell, I’ve seen your mom drink more than two glasses of wine once since she got elected. That was at Camp David with Cassidy and Jane.”

“I’ve had wine with Mom plenty of times since she became the president.”

“And did you pay attention to how much she consumed?” I asked.

“Not really. But we drank a bottle not long ago.”

“Mm. You mean the night you spent together in the Solarium.”

“Yeah. She’d already poured herself a glass when I got there. And we finished the bottle.”

“You finished the bottle.”

“I’m not a drunk, JD.”

“No. You were away from home, had a place to crash, were stressed, and enjoyed the better part of a bottle of wine over a couple of hours. But you drank that bottle, Shell. Your mom had a glass. She can’t indulge. She’s on the clock twenty-four hours a day. You understand that better than most people because you see it firsthand. She needs a clear head.”

“How did I miss that?”

I smiled. “I think that’s kind of the point.”

“What do you mean?” Shell asked.

“Opening a bottle of wine isnormal. That’s something your mom has done after a long day: kicked off her heels, opened a bottle of wine, ordered some take-out Chinese, and stretched out on the sofa. She tries to make this place feel normal.”

“For us.”

“Sure. But it’s also for her, Shell. I don’t care what anyone says. I’ve read the biographies of presidents and first families. It isn’tnormalhere. Your mom does her best to make it seem that way.”

Dana calls for my attention. “JD?”

“Huh?”

“Where did you disappear to?” Dana asks.

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“Sorry. Sometimes it hits me—everything Candace sacrifices for this job.”

“Like wine.”

I nod. “I think I have an idea what’s on your mind,” I say.

“JD, I think we’ll keep the Senate. The House?—”

“I know.”

“And that will complicate things for Candace. We both know that. They’ll try to find any grounds to launch an impeachment inquiry,” Dana says.

“She hasn’t done anything.”

Dana sighs. “JD. We both know what Alex and Joshua are doing isn’t all going through proper channels.”

“And that is new?”

“Probably not,” Dana admits.

“For Christ’s sake, Dana. The only difference between Candace and many people who’ve held this office is that she is trying to stop all the back alley dealing.”

“You know that I agree with you. Listen, I’m on your team now. You need to prepare yourself for whatever lies ahead.”

“Afraid I’ll take a swing at someone?” I quip.

Dana stares at me until I laugh.

“I know you won’t take a swing at anyone,” Dana says. “You want to protect Candy. I get it.”

“I know.”

“But the best way to do that is never taking the bait.”

“Did I make a misstep with Mr. Late Great America?” I ask.

“No. You didn’t. And that’s why you need to be in that kind of situation more often.”

I groan.

“JD, you are Candy’s biggest asset these next two years, most of which she will be thinking about reelection while she tries to govern.”

“And having me talk to people who take issue with—what did he say? Lesbians in the White House? That will help?” I ask.

“Yes.”

“I love you, Dana. You’re my best friend.”

“JD—”

“I do. And I also know you’re the best at what you do. So, forgive me if I don’t understand. People like Ivey are never going to get on Candace’s bandwagon.”

Dana takes a deep breath and exhales. “No. I doubt that asshole will ever vote for Candy. But some people who listen to him might.”

“How many? Two?”

Dana chuckles. I know where she’s headed with this conversation, which explains why she suggested liquor. A few people in Candace’s orbit have the insane idea I can move people who are against Candace to the supporter column. It’s ridiculous if you ask me.

“You don’t agree,” Dana says.

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“No. I don’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because, Dana, people like Ivey have two primary issues with Candace.”

“Go on.”

“She’s a woman who is married to a woman.”

“Some people,” Dana says.

“Dana, come on.”

“Okay. Most,” Dana concedes. “Not all, JD.” Dana holds up her hand. “You poll well.”

I roll my eyes. I hate this stuff. I hate that anyone polls my popularity or Candace’s. Plus, I don’t believe in polls.

“Okay,” Dana says. “You don’t like that anyone polls popularity. I know that.”

“It’s not just that. I don’t trust polls. Who do they poll? Come on. I’m forty-five. I’ve never been polled about anything. I don’t think I know one person who has ever been polled.”

“It’s a sample.”

“Yeah—you think you can sample two hundred or even two thousand people and have any indication of what the masses think or feel?”

“It’s scientific,” Dana argues.

“It’s nonsense. Look, if you want me to do this because you believe it’s helpful, I will do it. Don’t talk polls to me.”

“I do think it will help. That interview will help us hold the Senate. It might even help with a few seats in the House.”

“I doubt it.”

“You shouldn’t,” Dana says. “People like you.”

“And you know this because polls tell you.”

“I don’t need a poll to tell me.”

I pass Dana a pint of vanilla ice cream and pop the lid off a pint of pistachio ice cream for myself. It’s no wonder Candace’s jeans are tight.

“JD?”

“Huh?”

“You disappeared again.”

“I was just thinking I’ll probably get fat by the time Candace launches the next campaign.”

“What?”

I hold up the ice cream. “Candace drowns her sorrows and stress in ice cream. I prefer burgers—and fries.”

Dana laughs. “This is why people like you.”

“Because I like burgers and fries?”

“In a way, yes.”

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I know what Dana is trying to say. I'm not a "typical" first lady. I think we've covered that. I sigh.

"JD, it's not a bad thing."

"No. But it bugs me."

"It bugs you that people like you?"

"No. It bugs me that people don't see Candace as a person, Dana."

"Candy has been in the public's eye for decades. It goes with the territory."

"It shouldn't."

"It shouldn't. But it does. You help humanize her, JD. I told you. Candy has laughed more since she met you. She hasn't changed. She's more comfortable being herself in every situation."

"Candace has never been fake."

"No. But she kept up the polish. She lets people see her—the real her—or at least glimpses of the Candy we know and love more than she did before you were a couple."

"I doubt it. And even if it's true, I'm not sure it's because of me," I say.

“Trust me about this, JD. Candy trusts you. She trusts in your marriage. She loves the kids. She loved Jessica—not the way she does you.”

“I know.”

“She knows you’ll be there, JD. And I don’t know if Candy has felt that kind of security with anyone except Pearl. It’s my job to read the tea leaves. That means I need to observe people. I spent years listening to Candy—watching her. You’ve helped her find her footing. She always says she wouldn’t be here without you.”

“She would.”

Dana smiles. “No. I don’t think she would.”

I’m stunned. Dana practically worships Candace.

“Surprised to hear me say that?”

“Yes,” I reply.

“It’s true. She’s always been the right person to lead. She needed someone to anchor her. I heard you say something a few weeks ago.”

“Oh? What did I say?” I ask.

“You were talking to Shell one day. You said that Candace is the center of your world. You’re a part of hers. JD, you are the center of her world. Believe me.”

“Dana—”

“You are. I was in the room—or close to it—all the years when you weren’t. I see her

differently, but clearly. She might be reeling—ready to hand someone their?—”

“Ass?”

“Yes—or their walking papers. I know when that’s about to happen. She removes her glasses, massages her eyes, and then looks at your picture before addressing the room. You keep her steady even when you’re not with her.”

“You know I’ll do whatever she asks.”

“I do. She won’t ask.”

Dana has an advantage over anyone close to me and Candace. She knows us. And she was close to us both before we fell in love.

“You didn’t ask to work in my office because you were worried about your recovery, did you?” I ask.

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“It’s a factor.”

“Or an excuse.”

“Not an excuse. Maybe an opening. Dee’s terrific, JD. And Laura was great. Neither understands the gravity of the presidency,” Dana offers.

She’s right. Dee is young and eager. She’s intelligent, and I’m confident she’ll be successful no matter what she chooses. Laura was the perfect fit for my office when we arrived at the White House. A new presidency differs from one that has had time in office. And the upcoming elections will require more from us all than the last. Dana can ask me for the things Candace needs but won’t request.

“I’ll do whatever she needs, Dana.”

“I won’t ask you to?—”

“You’ll ask me to agree to things I’d rather avoid. But I know you will only ask if it’s what you think is best for Candace. Thanks, Dana.”

“Why are you thanking me?”

Candace has a giant circle of friends. Although, she’d tell you most are “acquaintances.” Many of her relationships go far beyond casual conversation. She has a small circle of trust but an enormous sphere of influence. And that’s because she cultivates real relationships with people that endure. Most of my close friendships are within my family. It’s always been that way forme. When I was a kid, Craig and

Scott were my best friends. Sure, I attended a few parties with classmates and occasional sleepovers. I spent weekends and free time with my brothers and cousins or, if I could, with my dad.

I met Dana's husband, Steve, at Cornell, and we became fast friends. Dana entered my life when they started dating. I spent most of my college time with their friends. This isn't because I'm shy or closed off. I've always been focused on my work and my family. Maybe that's because I always felt like the rainbow sheep of my family, and their approval meant so much to me. And if I'm honest, I felt I had something to prove.

Building my business took time. The firm didn't hit its stride until the year I hired Melanie. I tried to create an environment where the team felt more like family than coworkers, but I didn't get close to anyone until Mel arrived. And then I met Candace.

I've learned a lot about myself since I met Candace. Being part of her family only increased my time with family. The thing about Candace and me is once you are in the circle of trust, you become family. Sometimes, that complicates things. Everyone needs someone to confide in who isn't close to their spouse or partner. Dana and I walk a fine line. She considers Candace a mentor and a mother figure, but she's been part of my life longer. I don't need to confide in Dana. She knows me better than almost anyone. Having her on my team isn't only an asset for me as First Lady, but it's also a relief for me as just JD.

"It helps," I explain. "Having you here—not needing to explain what I'm uncomfortable with."

"Good," Dana says. "I needed this change, too."

I tilt my head curiously.

“I love Candy. I love working for her. Watching the toll this job takes on her, JD, has become more difficult. Being here, I can help you both, and I have my best friend close. This breakup with Steve has been hard.”

“I’m sorry, Dana.”

“So am I. It’s for the best. I think it’s the right time to make changes.”

I point to the pint of ice cream in front of Dana. “Eat your ice cream,” I tell her.

“JD?”

“Yeah?”

“You always say how lucky the country is to have Candy. I agree. They’re lucky to have you, too. We all are.”

Chapter Two

Candace

Being apart from Jameson and Cooper isn’t my preference. I’ve also lived long enough to know that all healthy relationships require balance. While some might like to deny it, a bit of distance occasionally helps. I’m not sure I subscribe to the saying, “Absence makes the heart grow fonder.” It can. Too many prolonged absences often create rifts that become insurmountable valleys. Balance is key. Jameson and I have worked to find the middle ground in our chaotic existence. Life in a big family is always hurried, and while I wouldn’t trade our life for anyone’s, it’s further complicated by my position.

Striking anything akin to balance while serving as the president requires a Herculean

effort, not only on my part. It's one reason I asked Cassidy to serve on my communications team. With Dana moving to Jameson's office, I need someone who understands me. Cassidy's presence differs from Dana's or Shell's. Cassidy is my equal. She respects me but also knows I don't have all the answers to the problems our country faces—or my family confronts. We both have big families composed of even bigger personalities. Navigating the competing priorities of children and spouses whose ideas and personalities often clash isn't unlike traversing the political landscape. We've known each other since I was a senator. Our friendship is one of mutual respect and admiration. Having Cassidy close grounds me because I know she sees me clearly. It's different from the relationships I share with Dana and Shell. They're both incredibly talented and devoted to me, but I also play a parental role in their lives. That can sometimes make it difficult for them to see me clearly.

Dana started working for me a couple of years after she graduated from college. She was as starry-eyed and exuberant as she was intelligent and driven. I adore Dana. I've spent more time with her over the years than almost anyone. She is just as much a daughter to me as the two I gave birth to. She also has me on a pedestal, much like Shell.

Having my daughter close is an asset in more ways than I can count. And I love that Shell is a part of my administration. She's as enthusiastic as she is intelligent. She's passionate about the political world and remains hopeful about the future. Her youth and vibrance help me navigate a world that often feels like a dystopian novel. And her presence reminds me why I got into this business.

It is a new world—one where face-to-face discussion, handshaking, baby kissing, and town halls have been eclipsed by TikToking, Tweeting, Facebook Live, and Instagram. I see the advantages, but I also see the pitfalls. The constant flow of words and images flying by on screens makes shaping narratives that serve a divide-and-conquer mentality easier. It's too much to process. That leads people to carve out small corners where they find comfort—places that reinforce their beliefs rather than

challenge them.

If you listen to me, you might think I oppose technology. I don't. My concern is how technology is used. Like everything else, the government walks a fine line between oversight and interference. This reality keeps me up many nights. No one can divorce governing from politics; the two work together. That reality has always created problems, but the alternative is a country led by a monarchy or a dictator, which I find unacceptable.

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We stand on a narrow ledge overlooking an abyss I once thought was unimaginable. Politics has always been riddled with self-interest, special interests, and a dizzying amount of capitulation. Anyone who suggests otherwise hasn't been close enough to the political landscape to understand. But this moment is unlike any before. There is a level of anger and discontent in the nation and the world that I can't recall ever experiencing. It's normal for people to criticize the government and typical for them to feel dissatisfied with their wages and expenses. It's also common for the electorate to direct their anger at the government. I don't believe I've ever felt it this intensely.

This trip is timely. Flying aboard Air Force One always provides me with an opportunity to escape for a few minutes. Unless something urgent arises, I've established a policy to leave me to my thoughts while we prepare for take-off until we reach a comfortable cruising altitude. That may seem like little more than a minute, but I gratefully accept every second of quiet. I hope to gain some perspective on this brief trip so that I can focus more earnestly on my family when we're together. Lately, I have struggled to set work aside for even a few moments. Endless scenarios race through my mind while I try to listen to Cooper recount his day or Jameson share a conversation with one of our kids. Balance. I desperately need some balance in my thoughts.

This trip will enable me to connect with people from different regions of the country. I wish I could say it would lead to conversations with those who oppose my presidency the most, but it won't. There was a time when people crossed party lines to see a president—even if it was someone they didn't vote for. There was a mutual respect for the office, even if not for the individual who held it. I'd never be so bold as to claim it fostered unity. Instead, it created a shared space for people to find common ground. We seem to have entered an era where prioritizing America has

given way to political frustration and anger. That concerns me more than anything else that comes across my desk.

A knock on the door tells me that quiet time is over.

“Sorry,” Luke apologizes.

Choosing Luke as my Chief of Staff was one of the best decisions of my presidency. “Don’t apologize.”

“I know you like a little peace when we travel,” he says.

“And I know you wouldn’t knock unless you need me. Have a seat.”

“There’s a planned demonstration for the event today,” Luke explains.

"Demonstration" is a more palatable word than "protest." I raise an eyebrow at Luke, and he sighs.

“Candace.”

I offer him a smile. “Luke, protest is part of our political process.”

“Perhaps we should rethink your appearance,” he says.

I lean back in my chair and take a deep breath. “Did Ryan say something?”

Ryan McCarthy is the lead agent for my security detail. He would have informed me if he had any reason to think that the Secret Service couldn’t protect me. It’s not that I want to bypass Luke; he’s an important partner and advocate for my initiatives and presidency. However, there are realities in the world that I only share with a very

close circle. It is my choice. Perhaps one day, history will judge me harshly for this decision. I have reason to believe there are leaks in my cabinet and that some individuals within the agency assigned to my protection do not prioritize my welfare.

Luke has grown hesitant about my public appearances since the explosion in New York. Most people close to me still feel anxious at public events. I do my best to project the confidence I sometimes lack. Holding a public office has always involved risks. The higher the office, the more public one's persona becomes—the more one invites greater scrutiny. I received threatening letters and calls as a senator, which intensified when I became governor of New York. The threats escalated even more when I announced my candidacy for the presidency. And now? They've reached a point of resulting in an attack.

I knew threats to my life would become more serious if I assumed the presidency. I want to say I understood. No one can fully grasp how life changes when you live in the White House.

"Candace," Luke begins again.

"No," I tell him. "Luke, we need to face reality. People are unhappy with nearly everything. They're angry at each other. Some will be out to protest my agenda. Others will be out to counter-protest. I can't sit on the sidelines because something might happen again."

Luke sighs. I can feel his tension.

"Luke?"

"It's the American Brethren, Candace."

I hold his gaze deliberately and steady my breathing. This group was implicated in

the attack that landed Dana and me in the hospital and took the lives of three others, including a member of my Secret Service detail, Blake Everson.

“Candace?”

“It’s inevitable,” I tell Luke.

“Demonstrations and protests are inevitable, putting you in the crosshairs of?”

“I know who the Brethren are, Luke, and what they stand for. I also know why they’ve trafficked their intention.”

“And I know what you’re about to say.”

I nod. “Then you also know I won’t change my mind.”

“Candace, I spoke to Ryan, and while he won’t demand a change in your schedule, I think he’d be relieved if you agreed to forego this one stop.”

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Here's the problem that neither Luke nor Ryan understands: there will always be one stop where opposition borders on threats. The more I avoid those situations, the more they are likely to increase.

"Luke, I need you to listen to me. This is exactly what the Brethren want from my administration—from me. They want me to change my course."

Luke is ready to pounce. I hold up my hand.

"Luke," I warn him. "I cannot hide away because a hate group decides to come out of the shadows. Frankly, I'm glad they have emerged from the shadows."

"It's a?—"

"Risk?" I ask. "That's why we have an advance team that secures event spaces. It's also why I have the best security in the world. Before you say another word, no one, and I do mean no one, is more aware of the failures at the event in New York than me. I will not be intimidated by a bunch of insecure men wearing twisted crosses on t-shirts and chanting homophobic slurs."

Luke groans. "Indiana isn't New York."

"Your point?" I challenge him.

"It isn't Reid territory."

It's Luke's job to challenge me—to help me see perspectives I may otherwise avoid

considering. But it's also his responsibility to support my decisions when I make them explicit. He's not about to win this round.

"I understand your concerns," I tell Luke. "Listen. Just listen. This was inevitable. I can't hide from it. I won't hide from it."

"I know you believe the goal is to intimidate you. And I agree. I agree that the group is unlikely to make any attempt on your life. But their presence emboldens others, and it invites altercations."

Luke's not wrong.

"You're right," I say.

I have to chuckle when he tries to conceal his gloating. He is correct but doesn't see the bigger picture or give the issue the context it needs. This reality frustrates me continually—and not only with Luke.

There's a reason the president has a cabinet of department heads with rooms full of advisers. Context. Leading a large organization of any kind is challenging. The United States government is the world's largest organization. People are constantly spitting facts at me. The facts mean little unless they're given context. Someone can tell me they need funding for a program to help kids. That's terrific. How is it helping kids? Which kids will it help? How much money is required to provide this help? Context.

What Luke shared with me amounts to facts, not revelations.

"We're not deviating from our plan," I tell him. He's ready to pounce. "Listen to me. I said you're right. I mean that your observations are factual. Whether I speak at the event or not, there will be protesters and counter-protesters. And no one understands

the risk involved better than me—no one.”

“I understand that, but?—”

“No. You don’t,” I reply.

It’s unlike me to lose my patience with my close staff. Luke typically knows when to stop. I know everyone means well. I’m tired of being lectured by people about my safety—about risk. Luke was at the White House on the day of the bombing. He didn’t experience it the way Dana did—the way I did. He can’t understand. Not really. I don’t mean to underplay the fear and pain my family, staff, and the nation felt that day. I know what it’s like to be a spectator to devastation—to watch at a distance while someone I love is in danger. I’ve experienced that more than once. It isn’t the same as experiencing violence firsthand.

“I realize the gravity of the situation politically,” Luke says gently.

I nod. No. He doesn’t. I understand gravity. I felt it in Blake’s body, bearing down on mine. He saved my life. He carried out his oath and his duty in the fullest measure. He acted as my shield, and it cost him his life.

“No, Luke. You don’t understand. Do you think I’ve moved past that day in New York?”

“That’s not?—”

“Do you?” I repeat my question.

“No.”

“Then stop approaching me as if you do.”

“That’s not my intention.”

“I know. Your intention isn’t the point,” I tell him. “There are nights I wake up, and I think the weight beside me is Blake.”

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I can see the forced swallow in Luke's throat.

"I dream at night. I see Dana lying a few yards from me, bleeding. I wake up and think the weight pressing against me is Blake. I have to remind myself to breathe—close my eyes and repeat Jameson's name until I trust that when I open them, I will see her. You think I'm pushing because I want to prove I'm not afraid. Of course, I'm afraid. Jonah set off some firecrackers in Schoharie last week—I trembled for an hour. No one noticed except Jameson. My fear can't prevent my work. Too many people around me underestimate the gravity of my presence in that work. I will allow my fear to dictate my actions. I won't. People need to feel safe, Luke. They need to believe they can attend a political rally, a protest, or any event and feel secure. The truth is that safety is an illusion. No one can predict what will happen. It could be an accident that triggers an explosion or a fire. It could be another shooting or a natural disaster. I need to project confidence."

"But this is a preventable?—"

"Disaster?" I ask. "Do you have any reason—any verifiable evidence that my presence will endanger the crowd?"

"No. We have time," Luke says. "I know you're worried about losing the Senate. We can find alternatives?—"

"There isn't an alternative to being present."

"People understand."

“No. People don’t understand. My days are filled with meetings with powerful people, many of whom serve my administration. Do you know how often I’ve heard, ‘I serve at the pleasure of the president?’ That may be true. They forget that I serve at the pleasure of the people. You forget that. My family forgets that. I assure you; I have not forgotten it.”

“I’m not going to win this argument, am I?” Luke asks me.

“This isn’t about winning an argument. It’s bigger than that. What happened that day in New York was traumatic for everyone—everyone. People need to see me. I also need to see the people I serve. Do you know why I wanted to run for office?”

“I know you admired your grandfather.”

“I did. I do. My childhood wasn’t always easy. People looking at me from a distance assume because my family has money, my life is easy. I didn’t want things as a child. I had toys and bikes, went on trips, and never worried about paying for my education. I hated to be at home. My mother loved that house in Saratoga Springs. I don’t think she loved it more than she loved me, but she understood it better. I never felt like I was home there.

“Being at the house in Schoharie with my grandparents and Pearl—that was home. I could be myself. Anywhere I was with my grandparents felt like home. When I was about twelve, my mother planned a trip for the family to Europe. She was so excited. We were set to leave in August for two weeks. I’ll never forget the look on her face when I told her I didn’t want to go. My grandfather was campaigning that month. I wanted to be with him. My mother was furious.”

“So, you went to Europe?” Luke asks.

“Hell no.”

Luke chuckles.

“My mother was so angry at me that she extended their trip for another week. Maybe she thought that was a punishment, or maybe she just wanted to avoid me a while longer.” I chuckle. “I got to stay with my grandparents for three weeks. That was the best gift I could have been given. I was on the trail with Grandad most of the time. I loved every second of it. He could talk to anyone. He encouraged me to speak with everyone. I met interesting people everywhere we went. Some would ask about me or Grandad. Most told me about their lives and how Grandad helped or disappointed them. They had stories about meeting him before he was governor or how they’d seen him play baseball when he was in college.

I realize most people think I love to campaign because I get to share my vision and press the flesh. I do enjoy those things, but that isn’t why I love it. I also get to listen to the people who shape my vision and hear the truth. Sometimes, it’s uplifting, and sometimes, it’s ego-shattering. But I hear the truth out there—people’s truth—away from people keen to stay in my good graces.

“Groups like the American Brethren disgust me. It’s infuriating to know that we still have people in this world who embrace white supremacy and hate. But it is real. What they feel is as real to them as what I believe is real to me. It’s uncomfortable. I need to see it and feel it as much as I need to feel the encouragement of my supporters. And they need to feel the discomfort that accompanies seeing me as the leader of this country. This is about more than elections, Luke. It’s about much more than that.”

Luke smiles.

“Is that all you have for me?” I ask.

Luke laughs.

“Silly question,” I say.

“I’ll leave you in peace for a bit,” he says. “Candace?”

“Yes?”

“I do know why you love being with people. I may even know you’re right. That’s why we all want to keep you safe and chair,” Luke says as he leaves my office.

Deep breath. There are many moments when I wonder why I am the one sitting in this chair. When I was first elected to public office, I held the naive belief that I could change the world. Somehow, I thought that if I worked hard enough and remained honest and straightforward, I could eliminate the hatred directed at me. I didn’t understand the fear and anger behind all that hatred. It’s still hard for me to comprehend how people can become so hateful. But I also know that the ire directed at me isn’t about me.

I spent some time reviewing the transcripts of the interrogations the FBI conducted with members of the American Brethren after the bombing. Some parts were chilling, while others were infuriating. None of what was said surprised me. Mostly, it just makes me sad. I wonder where we took a wrong turn with these people. Was it neglectful or abusive parenting? Did our schools fail them? What happened to make them hate? It frustrates Jameson when I get into those conversations—trying to understand the why. She’s fiercely protective of the people she loves, me most of all. I love that about her. She sometimes views my effort to understand as equivocal tolerance. That’s not what I feel at all. If I allow myself to believe that I can never shift people away from hateful perceptions, I also concede my ability to create meaningful change. The moment I fall into that trap, I’ll know I am not the right person to sit in this chair.

Jameson has been deeply hurt by hateful, judgmental people she cares about. She’s

learned to manage that pain, but hearing the vitriol directed at me or our family makes those wounds resurface.

Initially, I tried to assuage her anger by assuring her I was unaffected by the hurtful things said about me. That only increased her ire. She knows that isn't true. What people say about me doesn't change who I am. I can try to influence or counter their assertions, but I can't force anyone to change their behavior, let alone their minds. I'd be lying if I claimed none of it bothers me. But it isn't the momentary sting I feel that weighs on me. It's how the lies, name-calling, and threats affect the people I love that gets under my skin—something Jameson quickly reminds me of. And my perceived unwillingness to fight back often frustrates those closest to me, Jameson included. I can't say I blame them. I also recognize that the temporary rush of verbally hitting back is fleeting, and the repercussions are usually far more painful than the brief thrill. I prefer to strike back where it matters most. I know that seeing me in the Oval Office is the ultimate revenge.

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Being president is an honor, and it's also a position I wish to keep. I want to say all my reasons are selfless. No one reaches this level of political life without ambition and a fair amount of ego, and I recognize that more than most of my supporters do. People often confuse confidence—even cockiness—with narcissism. Existing under the relentless glare of a blaring spotlight requires a degree of vanity. You have to enjoy attention if you hope to withstand the criticism and cruelty that come with it. It's another reality that demands balance. Of course, I care about what people think of me. I care about my legacy. But I also understand that I can't control those perceptions. I might influence them, but others will define my legacy. Some will venerate me; others will condemn me. Only a few will strive to understand me. I am constantly reminded of that reality.

I've enjoyed close relationships with previous presidents. I promise you, that is not enough to prepare someone for the pressure of the presidency. But it isn't the demands on my time, experience, or emotions, the critiques from the press, or the controversies stirred by others that sometimes make me question my decision to run for this office. The burden it places on my family takes the greatest toll on me. It's not my absences that cause Jameson and my children the most anxiety; it's how people talk about me and the inability to punch back. Keeping everyone calm after the bombing required more diplomacy than any G7 summit I could attend.

Politics is the unavoidable partner of governing. Any elected leader hoping to stay in office is always campaigning. Maybe it shouldn't be that way, but it always has been. It's become more complicated for me than it used to be. Jameson's uncle has made it his mission to attack our family any chance he gets. And then there's Laura.

I often think back to when I discovered Jonah's girlfriend is Lawson Klein's

daughter. Everyone around me was buzzing, worrying about how it would affect my political future. My first reaction was amusement, which quickly turned to concern for Jonah. It's ironic. Jonah is so much like Jameson that it often leaves me breathless. And God knows, he looks up to her—he lookstoher as well. And Laura reminds me of myself at her age.

Lawson Klein presents a greater challenge for me than any hate group. It doesn't help that his rhetoric emboldens those groups. But I'm not afraid to face him in a debate or competewith him at the ballot box. I worry about Laura. No matter what Lawson has done or can do, he's Laura's father. A part of her craves his acceptance and, more importantly, his affection. That's natural. She's often torn between her anger at him for what he says about me and her desire to bridge the gap between them. It reminds me that I can never stop trying, no matter how futile my attempts to reach people like Lawson or the American Brethren may be. Real people, including those I love, are always caught in the middle. I need a friendly voice.

I'm sure Jameson will be surprised by my call.

"Candace?"

"That's what they tell me," I reply.

"Uh-oh. Don't tell me Congressman Briggs got caught with his hand in the cookie jar or his hand on an intern."

I laugh gratefully. Congressman Thomas Briggs won an unlikely seat in a predominately red district in Indiana. Many would call him a Blue Dog Democrat, although he doesn't claim admission to any caucus. He's a center-right Democrat who might have found a home in the Republican party of my youth. I like Tom. We disagree on some things. He's a reasoned politician—someone who wants to get things done. He knows that passing lasting legislation takes time. He also understands

there is a need for fighting, silence, and compromise. His reelection is seen by most as an uphill battle. A few of his advisers counseled him to keep a distance from me. Tom understands something political wonks who focus on polls and the press don't. Everyone knows he's more aligned with me than he is opposed to my policies. As Luke pointed out, Indiana may not be Reid Country, but I have more enthusiastic supporters than any poll reveals. Tom knows that. Avoiding me risks alienating them. And he needs them to show up on election day.

"Thankfully, Tom seems to know to keep his hands to himself," I say.

"Mm. Didn't he have a crush on you?"

I laughed. "Stop."

"He wanted to be First Lady. I think his wife told me that."

"Jameson!" I laugh harder. "You really are a lunatic."

"Well, I am committed."

"Thanks," I say.

"Who pissed you off today?"

I sigh.

"Candace?"

"No one. The American Brethren are planning to protest at Tom's rally."

"I heard."

“You did?” I ask.

“Yeah. Shell called me in a snit about an hour ago.”

“That might explain Luke’s suggestion.”

“Don’t tell me. He wanted you to skip it?”

“Okay. I won’t tell you,” I reply.

Jameson sighs.

“Jameson?”

“You can’t skip it,” Jameson says.

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“But you wish I would.”

“Sure. You wish you could, too.”

I chuckle.

“Ryan would have told you if he thought you needed to change your plans.”

“I know.”

“That isn’t why you called. Do you want to talk about it?” Jameson asks.

“Lawson.”

“You mean Laura.”

“Can I separate the two?” I ask.

“No. Not really. Candace, you can’t keep beating yourself up for what that asshole says and does. I know you want to protect Laura. She knows that. You can’t. All we can do is remind her that we love her. You know this.”

“He fans the flames, Jameson. Lawson is determined to make life miserable for me. I can deal with that. Laura?—”

“Knows who her father is,” Jameson says. “Call Grant.”

“What?”

“Call Grant. It will make you feel better.”

Jameson’s suggestion shouldn’t surprise me. It has taken her time to accept Grant Hill as an extended part of our family. I can’t blame my family for their initial skepticism about Grant and his intentions. My breakup with his mother left scars on all my children. And Grant’s conservative upbringing and political affiliation didn’t inspire immediate trust. I’ve always understood the conflict between Grant’s heart and his mind, as it battles endlessly with reason.

For a long time, my kids held animosity towards my ex, Jessica. The publicity surrounding her infidelity made them perceive her affair in isolation—as though it were the sole reason for our breakup. I never doubted that Jess loved me. Living with me proved more challenging for her than she had anticipated. It wasn’t my kids or the caustic comments my mother made under her breath that widened the distance between us. My kids were older, concentrating on school and friends, while my focus narrowed in on my career. The media and political chatter intensified about my possible run for governorship, cabinet positions, and even a future bid for the White House. My time was in constant demand, which meant I received constant attention. Jessica struggled with jealousy, and the truth is, I didn’t pay close enough attention to her insecurities. If I was idealistic about anything, it was our relationship.

Coming out as a lesbian in my forties to my family was stressful. My public profile only heightened the anxiety. Jess and I didn’t publicly acknowledge our relationship for nearly a year after I came out. Jonah was still in junior high school and faced the brunt of the fallout, mostly teasing from his peers. Despite the stress and upheaval of revealing to my family and the world that I was a lesbian, I ultimately felt a sense of relief. I didn’t realize the weight I had been carrying until it was lifted. Jess was wonderful—supportive and patient. I thought we would conquer the world together; for a time, it felt that way. A million things impact a relationship, and if you aren’t

paying attention, they can add up to destruction.

We both had high-pressure jobs. I had the kids, and then Grant found Jessica. She told me about the baby she placed for adoption and how she often wondered about him. She never expected Grant to reach out to her, and in some ways, his entrance into her life amplified her insecurities. His adoptive parents were conservative Christians, openly opposed to the idea of same-sex relationships, abortion, and climate change. It was tough for Grant and painful for Jess. He wanted Jess in his life—wanted us in his life—but he feared his parents' rejection. She carried so much guilt about her decision to place him for adoption, and even more guilt because her sexuality and the notoriety of our relationship created conflict for him. Those insecurities manifested in unexpected ways, creeping between us. She was close to my kids—to Shell most of all. Grant didn't want anyone but us to know he'd reached out. Jess felt like keeping it a secret from my kids was a betrayal. She worried about how they'd react if and when they learned about Grant. She also worried about how that might affect me. There were so many questions and conflicts raging within her. I wasn't paying attention—not the way I should have. I don't believe Jess was seeking comfort from another woman. I think, subconsciously, she hoped to sabotage our relationship. It hurt us both. It hurt the kids. And it also hurt Grant.

Grant reached out to me about a year after Jess and I ended our relationship. He had been working at Family Values International for a few years and quickly climbed up the ranks. Lawson Klein had just taken over as the media director. Klein's fixation on me raised red flags for Grant, prompting him to send me information about FVI's political research and strategies. I tried to persuade him to leave the organization. His father had close connections with Lawson and Glenn Stanley, one of the founders. Grant wanted to please his parents while remaining true to his beliefs. I've often wondered if accepting his help was the right thing to do. He is as persistent as his mother.

“Candace?”

“Sorry.”

“I lost you for a minute,” Jameson says.

I sigh.

“You know Grant will help any way he can.”

“I know. I hate it, Jameson.”

“What do you hate?”

“Keeping him at arms’ length.”

“Then don’t.”

“You know how much resistance there is in my administration to Grant’s involvement—publicly.”

“Since when do you care about resistance?” Jameson asks me.

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“I don’t. I care about how it affects him.”

I hear Jameson sigh.

“Candace, you can’t continue to carry this guilt about Grant and his parents. He loves you and Jess. I don’t care what their political beliefs are; they should be able to understand how he feels.”

“It’s not just that. Jameson, my presence complicates his relationship with Jess. It always has.”

“No. Their bigotry complicates his relationship with Jessica and you. That isn’t on you or Jessica. Don’t say a word,” Jameson tells me. “I understand you better than even you give me credit for. I know you want to find the best in everyone—to believe there’s a way to bring people together. It’s one reason I love you. But you know you can’t force people to change. Grant’s parents are who theychooseto be.”

“They’re a product?—”

“Of their upbringings?” Jameson asks. “Sure. My mom and Uncle Jerry grew up in the same house with the same parents. They attended the same church. Jerry chooses to be hurtful. Maybe he believes all the things that come out of his mouth. I can’t say. And while I know you don’t believe me, I don’t care. I did. For a long time, I wondered how to make him accept me. I thought there must be a way to make it easier for my mom—easier for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes, for you. How do you think I felt when he took to the airwaves to try to hurt your candidacy?”

“Jameson, you know there wasn’t anything you could do to?”

“Ah-ha.”

I laugh. “Point taken.”

“Look, things with Grant and his parents have caused you all pain—you, Jessica, and Grant. I understand more than you think I can. Klein making a run for the White House, these hate groups winding people up—it’s another reminder of that time in your life. I get it. It takes you back to losing Jessica. And it also makes you think about your mom.”

“Am I that obvious?”

“Not to anyone but Pearl and me. Grant has accepted that he can’t change his parents. You need to follow his lead, Candace. If you want him to come back as an adviser, ask him. That’s your choice. Trust him to make his.”

“Are you sure you don’t want my job?” I tease.

“I’d be impeached inside of a week, Candace.”

“Lunatic.”

“I love you, Candace. But I think you might need to look in the mirror.”

“Are you calling me crazy?”

“Yes. Only a lunatic would ask for that job,” Jameson says.

I laugh. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I miss you.”

“That’s just because you’re headed to the Bible Belt.”

“Jameson!”

Jameson chuckles. “Hey, I tell it like I see it. Call Grant.”

“I will.”

“Good. Call Jess, too, while you’re at it.”

“Jess?”

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“Yes, Jess. Candace, you need someone outside this loop to talk to. Cassidy is part of the administration now. You need someone who isn’t in your political life—someone outside this?—”

“Mouse house?” I ask lightly. I hear Jameson cough. “Mm. I know you feel trapped sometimes.”

“So do you.”

“Fair,” I agree.

“Don’t second guess your instincts,” Jameson says. “You’ve wanted to bring Grant back for a while. You need his help. And he wants to help.”

Jameson is right. My hesitation isn’t because I fear resistance from those closest to me. I worry about Grant. I’m aware that people in my administration think Grant left his role as an adviser because of the pressure exerted on me. He left because I didn’t want his position or relationship with me to strain his relationship with his parents further. I could silence opposition to his presence when I was in a room. Tamping down the skepticism and negativity he experienced outside my office proved difficult.

“Candace?”

“I know you’re right.”

“And I know you want to protect him. You want to protect all of us. We’ve been through this. We all need to feel we can protect you. If it makes you feel better, Shell

is back. She may have initially questioned Grant's motives; she loves him. There are different dynamics around you now."

"Thank you."

"Mm. If you're still on the fence when we hang up, look in the top righthand drawer of your desk," Jameson says.

"Did you leave me something?"

"Just open the drawer when we hang up if you're still wrestling with this."

"Maybe I will."

"I'll see you soon," Jameson promises.

"I miss you."

"I miss you, too. I'll have Coop call you tomorrow. I love you."

"I love you, Jameson."

I hate ending our call. I look at the drawer of my desk and slide it open slowly. I'm surprised to see an envelope addressed to me. I'm curious If Jameson left me scripture to study or if she's warning me to expect a remodel of the White House.

You thought I left you another fortune cookie.

I did.

If you want your fortune told, look in your briefcase.

I chuckle.

I know you have a million things on your plate and a billion more on your mind. It hasn't been easy the past few months. You always amaze me. You can handle anything that comes your way. I believe that. Don't let anyone make you second guess your instincts. You never make a decision without considering everyone's perspective and all the facts you have before you. But in the end, you've been successful because you understand people. Your gut tells you how they are likely to respond to your decisions. I see it with the kids. I even see it in Bible Study.

Lunatic.

I felt the tension from you last night. Trust you, Candace.

I love you more than anything.

Jameson.

I close my eyes and slip the note back into the envelope. Jameson says I amaze her. Laughable. She surprises me daily—in the best of ways. That began when I opened the door to find her standing on the porch. I can only imagine my expression.

It's interesting; people often ask Jameson what she thought and felt when she met me. I'm always touched by her heartfelt recounting of that day. People seldom ask me what I thought when Jameson landed on my doorstep. I confess I assumed JD Reid was a man. I shouldn't have. That assumption was made because JD was Steve Russo's best friend. The moment Jameson smiled, I lost my heart. I'm sure most people would think that's a romantic retelling. I assure you it isn't.

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I've met many people who exude confidence, poise, fear, or insecurity. But I've encountered only a few whose authenticity radiates through their smile. Finding a partner to share your life isn't easy for anyone. Having a public persona often complicates that. My career and public profile never concerned Jameson. She saw me from the moment we met. Jameson accepts people as they are and meets them where they are. Her only expectation of me is honesty. That's all it's ever been. And I value hers more than any words could express.

I take a deep breath and place the call I've avoided. "Hi, Grant."

Chapter Three

Jameson

Everything in my life changed when I fell in love with Candace; everything except the need to work hard. I don't view our marriage as work. I've invested more in our relationship than anything in my life. Navigating a large family of larger-than-life personalities, competing ideas, and passionate opinions demands attention and investment. I graduated third in high school and made the All-State basketball team in my junior and senior years. Both required loads of work. Candace and I have many things in common. Our work ethic is among them. We understand that intelligence and talent will only take a person so far. The greatest minds in the world, the most celebrated athletes, innovative scientists, and revered artists possess as much perseverance and dedication as they do ability. Anything worth having, anything you cherish, demands care.

"Jameson?"

I offer Pearl a smile. "I thought you'd be taking advantage of a quiet evening."

Pearl flops onto the sofa with a thump.

"Bored?" I ask.

"Jameson, do you know how often I hear quiet?"

"Isn't the point of quiet that you don't hear anything?"

"Exactly!"

I laugh. Someone is always whispering into Pearl's ear unless she's whispering in theirs. "It is strange without voices everywhere."

"You look worried," Pearl says.

"No."

"Nice try."

"I'm not worried."

"Candy is tired," Pearl observes.

"Candace needs someone outside these walls and our family to talk to, Pearl."

Pearl sighs heavily.

"You think so, too," I say.

“Jonathan’s illness is taking a bigger toll on her than she lets on.”

“I know. I told her to call Jess.”

Pearl smiles.

“You agree,” I surmise.

“Jessica understands Candy better than most people. They were friends for a long time before Candy thought about romance. Yes. I agree. We’re all too close to this place.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“We both know I can’t stop you,” Pearl says.

I chuckle. “Do you regret making this move? Coming to DC with us?”

“No.”

“But?”

“I don’t regret coming here,” Pearl assures me. “My boys have always trekked off on their own. They can visit me here as easily as they can in Schoharie.”

“There’s a but.”

“No.”

“Pearl?”

“Jameson, I won’t be here forever. Don’t say anything. I hope I live to be a hundred. I’m happy to be here as long as I can move and think. We both know I wasn’t born yesterday. Candy needs people to lean on—not only Cassidy and the kids. And?—”

“And not only me.”

Pearl nods. “Jonathan has always supported her. The kids don’t realize how close they remained after the divorce. Whatever his shortcomings, he’s been a sounding board for her since she was in college. His illness weighs on her. You know that.”

I’m always curious about what people think about Candace and her relationships, even the kids. Her professional confidence often overshadows her lingering hurt and insecurity in many relationships.

Pearl clears her throat. “You know, she’s unlikely to call Jessica,” she says.

“Probably,” I admit. “Especially since she wants to bring Grant back as an adviser. Do you think I should call Jess?”

“I think Candace will need more support than she realizes when Jonathan passes.”

Pearl smiles at me. It’s a smile I’ve seen before, laced with a touch of melancholy. It tells me I’m on the right track and that Pearl doesn’t believe Jonathan will be with us much longer.

“You don’t think Jonathan will make it until the holidays, do you?”

“No one can predict life and death,” Pearl replies. “It happens—the surge before the storm,” she continues. “Jonathan is riding high now with energy. That energy can trick you into believing nothing is wrong. I’ve seen it before and so has Candy. She’ll hesitate to call Jessica now. Their relationship hurt Jonathan. He’d been friends and colleagues with Jessica for years. When things ended between Candy and Jessica, Jonathan helped Candy pick up the pieces. Jonathan’s feelings for Candy have always run deep—differently than hers.”

I take a deep breath and sigh. Candace loves Jonathan. I know their marriage was rocky, and she could never love him the way he loves her. More than her sexuality caused their marriage to break down. Jonathan is a good person, but he’s not overly demonstrative. He was hyper-focused on his career. That only became more intense when they lost Lucas. He’s spent more time with the kids this year than in the last decade. Maybe it should make this easier—knowing he’s dying. Somehow, it makes everything feel worse. Pearl is right. Candace won’t want to introduce Jessica into the equation right now.

Pearl calls for my attention. “Jameson?”

“I know you’re right. Jonathan understands,” I say.

I don't share the details of my conversations with Jonathan Fletcher. As strange as it is to some people, I consider him a good friend. He's always treated me with kindness. I know he loves the kids, and I know he'd do anything for Candace. That's more than enough for me.

"Jonathan doesn't harbor any bad feelings toward Jessica," I tell Pearl.

"You've spent a lot of time with him recently."

I chuckle. Shell commented a few weeks ago that watching her father and me laughing together while drinking a beer was the weirdest thing she'd ever seen. "Shell thinks it's weird," I say. "Yeah. We talk," I admit. "He's worried about Candace the most—more than the kids, I think."

"He's known her a long time."

"I think I'll give Jess a call."

Pearl grins.

"That was your plan all along, wasn't it?" I ask.

"No. We can call it the bonus round. I came down here to see if you wanted some company. Or maybe I just needed some."

"Movie night?" I suggest.

"You mean one without creatures, cartoons, or cars?"

"At least Coop has moved past talking turtles."

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“Jameson, he asked me to watch some crazy movie with a talking raccoon—in space.”

Cooper loves *Guardians of the Galaxy*. “It could be worse,” I offer.

Pearl stares at me and I burst out laughing.

“Sorry,” I apologize. “What do you have in mind?”

“Old disaster films.”

“I’m in—If you rustle up popcorn and soda,” I agree.

“Okay. We’re starting with *The Towering Inferno*. The real one,” Pearl says.

“Hoping to burn something down?” I tease.

“Well, it was that or *The Poseidon Adventure*. I’d rather see Robert Wagner fall out a window on fire than watch Shelly Winters drown. I’m old, Jameson. I need to hold out a little hope.”

I shake my head and chuckle as Pearl walks out of the room. Before Candace ran for governor, we sometimes had impromptu movie nights with Pearl. They both love disaster movies, likely because there is always a hero at the end—not necessarily a happy ending. There’s triumph but also loss. As much as people make fun of the over-the-top drama in disaster movies, they reflect the truth of the human condition. How do people react in a crisis? I think that for Candace, these movies make her

believe that even when everything is on fire or underwater, she can make a difference. And Pearl? She enjoys the drama. They've both spent their lives to holding everyone together. Sometimes, it's fun to watch things burn down—things where no one can get hurt. Time to place an unlikely call.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Jess.”

“JD?”

“I think so. Some days, I wonder who that is, though,” I reply.

Jessica laughs. “Don't tell me you're adopting another child.”

Now, I laugh. “I think we're done in that department.”

“Mm. Okay. Who got arrested?”

“If anyone did, they haven't called yet,” I reply.

“Well, that leaves only two possibilities for this call. Either someone is getting divorced, or you're worried about Candy. I'll make a wild guess it's the latter.”

“I don't know if worried is the right word.”

“How's Jonathan?” Jessica asks.

“For the moment, he's doing well—for the moment.”

Jessica sighs. “It'll hit her hard—harder than she'll let on.”

“I know. Jess, she wants to bring Grant back.”

“Good.”

“Are you sure?”

“He needs to help. It’s not easy watching people tear her apart.”

“Believe me, I know.”

“I’m sure you do. But you’re there to support her. Grant?—”

“She needs you right now, too,” I say.

Jessica sighs again.

“Jess, she needs a friend.”

“Candy can ask me for anything, JD. She knows that.”

“Yes, but she’s worried about how it will affect you.”

Now, Jessica laughs. “Me? I’m the Teflon bitch.”

Jessica’s laughter does little to conceal the underlying hurt in her statement. The kids have largely forgiven Jessica for her role in the break-up with Candace. As much as I know they love me, that transgression hurt them, and not only because of how public Jessica’s affair became. Or how protective they all are of their mother. They accepted her as part of their lives. It felt like another betrayal to them. And Jessica got pummeled in the press—unfairly. The media made her out to be a cold, calculating woman who used Candace for access to power brokers. Worse, the kids painted her similarly, as the coldhearted bitch who broke their mom’s heart. Even Grant was angry with her.

“Jess,” I say.

“I can handle whatever anyone throws my way, JD. We both know you’re living?—”

“In a mouse house.”

“What?”

“Mouse house, rat wheel—a tiny cage with a wheel that spins endlessly.”

Jessica laughs so hard she snorts.

“Well? What were you going to call it?” I ask.

“I was going to say under a constant spotlight.”

“Oh. That, too.”

“JD, someone is always looking for ammunition against Candy. Any sense that we’re interacting could?—”

I stop Jessica’s train of thought. “Let them say whatever they want. You were friends long before you were a couple. That didn’t work out. It happens. Fuck what anyone says.”

“JD?”

“I’m sorry. Maybe I could use your friendship as much as Candace needs it.”

That’s the truth. Jessica doesn’t hold back. She can get away with a level of bluntness that I can’t. She understands my frustration better than anyone. Being the partner of a powerful individual—a public figure- isn’t easy. Everything I say and do reflects on Candace, whether it should or not. Jessica knows what that experience is like. Candace was considered for vice president and Secretary of State when they were together. I don’t often admit this, but it’s a lot of pressure. I want to defend my wife against the accusations and attacks people hurl at her. I can’t—not in the way I’d like. I have to be cautious, even when I try to be direct. It pisses me off. No one understands that better than Jessica Stearns.

“I get it, and I promise I’ll keep your secret,” Jessica teases me.

“Jess, we don’t have friends outside the family or the political arena these days. She needs someone to vent to—someone who is not me. We both know she will handle anyone who dares to project anything untoward.”

“I’ll give her a call.”

“Thanks.”

“I know it’s hard,” Jessica says. “Needing to be cordial to assholes.”

“She doesn’t deserve it, Jess. I hate Lawson Klein. I don’t hate people. It makes me feel like shit. I want to hit back so much, I?—”

“I get it. There are ways to hit back that hurt more than a verbal punch, JD.”

“She doesn’t like to play dirty.”

“No,” Jessica agrees. “But Candy also needs to realize the difference between playing dirty and putting dirty laundry on the line to dry. She can’t hold back this time, JD. Klein won’t. Someone wants him to be her opponent. I think that’s partly because of Laura. They think she’ll be too cautious, and it will give them an opening.”

I never considered Jessica’s observation until now. I’ve learned more than I ever thought I would about politics. Jessica is a political ace. She gets it. It’s another benefit to her being part of Candace’s sphere. Candace might fight with Jessica, but Jess is unlikely to back off as quickly as Shell, Dana, or me. Candace needs her for more than one reason.

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“Maybe you should run her next campaign,” I offer.

“No thanks,” Jessica says. “Look, JD, I know it’s probably a little strange—Grant—me.”

“No,” I reply. “I don’t feel that way.”

I don’t. Candace’s past doesn’t threaten me. Jonathan and Jess are part of her, just like her parents, brothers, and the kids. She wouldn’t be the Candace I love if it weren’t for the relationships she’s had. I know that.

“I’m glad Candy has you.”

It’s funny; Jessica is sincere. I don’t think she’s ever truly gotten over Candace, and neither has Jonathan—not really. Candace isn’t the type of woman you can just “get over.” They would likely still be together if Jessica hadn’t cheated on Candace. Candace will deny that, but I think it’s true. Candace doesn’t give herself to anyone easily and doesn’t do anything halfway—not in business or relationships.

“JD?”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to space out on you.”

“How’s Coop?” Jessica asks.

I can hear the genuine interest in Jessica’s voice. I admit it surprised me how easily we got along from the beginning. When someone close to Candace asks how she can

have Jessica or Jonathan in her life after everything that unfolded in the past, she always answers the same way: “They’re good people; they just weren’t good for me.” The last time I heard her say that to one of the kids, I told her I think she’s wrong. She was stunned.

“I thought you liked Jonathan and Jess?” Candace asked.

I laughed. “I do. You didn’t let me finish,” I said. “You always say you weren’t good for each other. I don’t think that’s true. You weren’t right for each other—not for the long haul. Those aren’t the same things.”

Candace didn’t say anything. She just kissed me.

“Coop is great. He’s got a giant crush on an older woman,” I tell Jessica. “An older blonde woman with a lot to say.”

Jessica laughs. “He is definitely your kid.”

“I guess he is.”

“Listen, I’ll give Candy a call.”

“Thanks, Jess.”

“You never need to thank me, JD.”

I don’t know how to respond. I know that’s true.

“If you need to vent about the assholes running around with Klein, feel free to call me.”

I laugh. “Be careful what you offer.”

“Take care of yourself, JD.”

“Don’t worry about me,” I say.

“Mm. Do you mind if I give you one piece of advice?”

“What might that be?”

“Take care of yourself. You’re not me. God knows you’re the person Candy has always needed. But, JD, even a saint, would struggle to live in Candy’s shadow. People think I was jealous of her success. That was never the problem between us. She fights fair, JD. She was that way when she practiced law. I want to say I always take the high ground. I like to win. I also believe in justice. Sometimes, it doesn’t come without a little muscle.”

That’s the truth if I have ever heard it.

Jessica continues. “Loving Candy is easy. Loving her life isn’t. I don’t mean the kids, and I’m not talking about the pace she’s always kept. She’s the most sensitive person I’ve ever known. She can also be stubborn to a fault—she gives until it breaks her. That is hard to take. Watching people come after her while she tries to play nice is infuriating. Candy isn’t attracted to wall flowers, JD. She loves you because you’re as smart and driven as she is. But it is you who sacrifices the most to let her fly. She knows that. Don’t be afraid to let her know what you need. And please—I’ve heard all about your love for scripture from Shell.”

That does it. I burst out laughing. Shell really should just rent a damned billboard at this point. “Thanks,” I say.

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“Any time,” Jessica replies. “Talk soon.”

I continue to chuckle when Jessica disconnects the call. I need to find some way to let Shell know that Jessica and I have discussed Bible study. I can imagine the look on her face. Maybe she’ll think twice about her advertisements!

Chapter Four

Candace

Typically, being on the campaign trail energizes me. Today, I feel exhausted. Ryan was in my hotel room at five this morning to give me an updated threat assessment. No matter how many years I’ve spent in politics, I still struggle to understand why anyone believes violence is a viable solution to problems. I now have Luke and Ryan standing in front of me, warning me to exercise caution. I don’t think I’ve ever been so glad to see Cassidy walk into a room.

“I’ve listened to everything you’ve said. I’ll agree to avoid interaction with the crowd outside the barriers. I’m not stepping off the platform to be herded like cattle into a car.”

“Madam President, please,” Luke says. “Be?—”

“Donotsay reasonable,” I warn him, turning my attention to Ryan. “Ryan?”

“I understand, Ma’am. I’d prefer it if we added an extra layer of security close to the platform.”

“Go on,” I say.

“I know you prefer these events to be authentic—first come, best access. Given the presence today, I think it might be wise to know whom you’ll be shaking hands with,” Ryan says.

I groan. I could press this issue. The Secret Service’s job is difficult enough without me adding another layer of resistance or insistence. “Okay.”

Ryan nods, and Luke exhales.

“On one condition,” I say.

“Ma’am?” Ryan asks.

“You should have someone screen a few people at the front of the line—respectfully. Inquire if they are willing to undergo a more thorough screening. I want at least a few of those people to shake hands with both the congressman and me.”

“It won’t change the optics,” Luke says. “It might?—”

I hold up my hand. “Optics matter,” I conceded. “But not more than access. You are only thinking about the short term. I am making a long-term investment. People need to know and believe that they matter to their leaders. Do you know what it’s like to wait in line for hours to attend a rally?”

“Well—”

“Well? I remember,” I tell Luke. “Do you know what it’s like to get up early, stand in a line for hours to see someone you support, only to get seated at the back when people far behind you have access?”

Luke is ready to pounce. Cassidy clears her throat from behind him.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Cassidy says.

I smile.

“It sounds like an interesting conversation,” Cassidy says as she walks over to the sofa and sits beside me.

“Maybe you can talk some sense into the president,” Luke says.

“Sense?” Cassidy asks. She looks at Ryan. “What did I miss?”

“The American Brethren plan to protest at today’s rally,” Ryan explains.

“Mm. So I heard on the news,” Cassidy says. “And?”

“Given their role in the New York bombing,” Luke begins. Cassidy cuts him off.

“Members of the group were implicated,” Cassidy reminds him. “There are plenty of groups like ABL,” she offers, looking back at Ryan. “Do you have some reason to believe they’ll attack anyone?”

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“Not specifically,” Ryan admits. “My greater concern is what their presence might spawn.”

Cassidy looks at me, and I shrug. She takes a deep breath and exhales it slowly.

“I’m not sure what I walked in on,” Cassidy admits. “There are still a couple of weeks in this election cycle. The president can’t hide in a corner.”

“No one is suggesting that,” Luke says.

“No?” Cassidy questions.

“Cassidy,” Luke says.

“You embolden these groups every time you change the president’s schedule. That’s a fact. If you think for a moment that there is any organization in government without leaks, you’re deluded. Our government is the leakiest ship in the world. No one knows that better than the president. I’ve never known her to be unreasonable,” Cassidy says, turning to me. “What did you propose?”

“Some adjustments,” I reply.

Ryan rolls his eyes but chuckles. “We’ll make it happen, President Reid.”

“Thank you, Ryan.

Luke groans.

“Something else you’d like to offer?” I ask him.

“I don’t enjoy pressing you,” he replies.

“Then know when you’ve lost the advantage and stop,” I say.

He nods, looks at Cassidy, sighs, and leaves the room.

“Busy morning?” Cassidy asks.

“I know they’re both doing their jobs.”

“Are you worried?”

I shrug. “No. No more than any day.”

“You look tired,” Cassidy observes.

“Tell you the truth?”

Cassidy nods.

“I’m considering cutting this trip short and heading back to Washington tonight.”

Cassidy isn’t surprised. There’s something special about finding a best friend. Cassidy would agree that the closest friendship we have outside of family and work is with each other. There are days when I wonder if I should have left Cass out of the administration. She was the best choice to stand before the press, but that isn’t why I asked her to be my press secretary. I needed someone nearby at work who sees Candace. Too many people dismiss Candace from the president as if we are separate individuals. There are aspects of President Reid’s work and public life that do not

thrill Candy. But Candace StrattonFletcherReid is behind every decision the president makes. Cassidy understands that. She respects the authority of my position and trusts my professional judgment. When she looks at me, she sees me. That isn't easy for most people.

The presidency is more than just a title or a job; it represents the American people and embodies a nation's values and intentions. While the president is only a person, the presidency encompasses much more. This distinction can be challenging for many people close to my administration. It's different for Cassidy. She lives in a surreal world, one that often seems as if it has been pulled from the pages of a novel. No novel, movie, or show could capture the surreal atmosphere surrounding the presidency. Fiction is held to the standard of plausibility. Reality is not.

"I realize this was a long flight for you," I say.

"Don't worry about me," Cassidy says. "I was happy to escape, even if it was just for the day. It's loud at home. Feel like telling me why you want to cut this trip short?"

"Truthfully?" I ask.

"I hope so."

"I miss Jameson, Cass."

Cassidy smiles.

“But I also know I need to be here,” I confess.

“Candace, I hate to state the obvious, but why don’t you have Jameson meet you here?”

“Because that requires planning,” I reply. “Everything requires a plan. I can think of a million reasons to return to DC. None would raise any eyebrows.”

“True.”

“It’s not about protests or boring congressional candidates.”

Cassidy giggles. She has spent enough time campaigning with her ex-husband to know that the company of some people who run for office can be as dull as watching paint dry. I’ve seen far more colorful paint than some of the people I’m set to travel with this week. They’re nice enough. Capable. I can’t help but wonder if they’re the best we have to offer. Two are former prosecutors, and one is a former mayor. On paper, they are highly qualified for the offices they seek. But they’re also largely out of touch with the people they serve. That’s the hardest part of living in the White House for me. Even when I was the governor, I saw everyday people—the ones who elected me. How can I serve their needs when I don’t interact with them? I’m frustrated. Jameson has always been able to bring me back to myself and center me.

“Denver Minor is boring,” Cassidy says.

We're scheduled to campaign with Denver Minor in—wait for it—Denver tomorrow. It's sad to admit I think that's why the party pushed him to run. What a terrific campaign slogan! Denver is Denver. I'm not making that up.

"He's capable," I say.

"That's a ringing endorsement," Cassidy says lightly.

"Denver is Denver might grab attention, but we need better candidates in two years if I hope to get reelected."

Cassidy sighs. She has never envisioned herself working in politics, but that doesn't change the fact that she possesses a keen understanding of how politics works and what types of candidates can excite voters.

"You agree," I say.

"You know, I agree. Finding candidates who are both capable and able to spark excitement is never easy. Discovering those who also share your values and vision? That will encounter resistance."

Here's a truth that politicians rarely acknowledge: they are perpetually campaigning. Once you reach this level, everyone is either sprinting to be close to you or fleeing as fast as they can from you. Finding people who share my values may not be as challenging as discovering those who align with my vision. I understand that, and so does Cassidy. I hesitate to resort to a clichéd chess metaphor, but the presidency resembles a massive strategy game. There aren't many actions I initiate today that will bear fruit in my first term. The consequences of many, if not most, of my policies and decisions won't be felt in earnest until I'm back living in Schoharie.

Achieving lasting change is not easy. Much of what I believe we should invest in,

both at home and abroad, is exactly that: an investment. People want immediate solutions to their problems—and to the world's. It isn't that simple.

"Candace," Cassidy calls out to me. "You need a team that understands your goals, and you need support from people who aren't afraid to get in the mud with Lawson Klein on your behalf. The moment this election is over, the next cycle begins. We both know that. That's why you're missing JD."

"It's a big part of the reason," I admit. "I've seen ugly, Cassidy. So have you. Klein's people don't have a bottom."

"There's something you aren't saying."

"Jess called me last night."

Cassidy nods. Her ex-husband was a New York attorney turned congressman. She has known Jessica since before she met me. Cassidy was also one of the first people to offer her support when I came out as a lesbian. She was extremely popular in New York, and many believed she should have run for the seat her husband held.

"You asked Grant to come back, didn't you?"

"I did. I thought that was the reason for her call. It turns out Jameson called her."

Cassidy laughs.

"You're not surprised," I observe.

"No. JD knows you, Candace. I realize she isn't overly fond of politics."

I groan.

“She loves being part of your world,” Cassidy reminds me.

“I know.”

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“She also knows Jessica. Jess isn’t afraid of a little mudslinging—or mud wrestling.”

I raise a brow at Cassidy.

“Stop,” Cassidy says, chuckling. “You know exactly what I mean.”

“I suppose I do.”

“I realize you need to take the high ground.”

“We can’t afford to lose the next election, Cass. There’s too much at stake. The fact that anyone would consider Lawson as my opponent tells me more than I want to know. They aim to dismantle everything my administration has initiated. And I think we both know they won’t stop there.”

I feel a headache coming on. My differences with former opponents have always been apparent. Until the Republicans nominated Bradley Wolfe, I never worried about continuity—not when it came to foreign policy and essential services. Even Wolfe’s rhetoric and social policies troubled me. Bradley Wolfe has business interests across continents. I don’t like or agree with what he stands for, but he would not have been easily led to conclusions—not when dealing with foreign policy or the country’s economic health. The legacy he envisioned for himself is monumentally different from my vision. Wolfe would not be easily manipulated—by people in his orbit or beyond. I suspect he would have sought to roll back civil rights, and his policies would have added to the economic strain on working-class families. He would have countered anything too extremist. Knowing that he removed Lawson Klein from his inner circle is all the proof I need to believe Wolfe would have remained

closer to the center than many of his allies would have preferred. Klein won't.

Lawson isn't guided by logic—not even by a logic I find abhorrent. He's driven by anger and a warped sense of entitlement. Worse, he doesn't realize that he's someone's puppet. He believes he's in control. Maintaining independence at this level of politics is no easy task. There are both direct and indirect “allies” with constant expectations. Unless you are clear—I mean with crystal transparency—that you will not be beholden to donors or advocates, you quickly find yourself at their beck and call. Whoever is behind Lawson Klein's political ascension expects nothing less than his adherence to their goals. The amount of foreign money filtering to his cause is more than worrisome—it's alarming.

“Candace?” Cassidy asks.

“I've seen this once,” I tell Cassidy. “When John was running for president. There was so much foreign money filtering into the campaigns?—”

“I know,” Cassidy says.

“They play along game,” I say.

“The Republicans?”

“No. It isn't partisan—not really. The people who want me out and Lawson in are the same people who wanted John Merrow removed from office to install Larry Strickland.”

“God, Strickland was slimy.”

I laugh. “John never wanted him as a running mate. He compromised for money. Choosing Larry brought his campaign a much-needed surge of funds. God only

knows what would have happened if Don hadn't won the primaries. A full term with Lawrence Strickland as president? I don't want to imagine the damage."

"I get it."

"The truth is, Cassidy, I was fortunate to be elected. Don't say anything. Wolfe wasn't the best candidate—he lacked political instincts. He was too dry, frankly. And, like it or not, politics is like a wrestling match. People are drawn in by colorful personalities. Most of the time, there isn't a hero and a villain; it's the donkey versus the elephant. Klein will turn it into a blood sport. I know he will portray me as the devil, and there will be no line too far to cross."

"It seems like it would be easier sometimes, doesn't it?" Cassidy asks. "Being the villain."

"You have no idea how many times I've envied him. Not for who he is, but for how who he is becomes permission for his behavior. I'd love to retaliate," I admit. "With a string of colorful expletives."

Cassidy laughs. "I know you're reluctant to let Jess use her oppositional research on Klein."

"It's a slippery slope. There's a risk to everything."

"True. Jessica Stearns is the best at what she does, Candace. You know that. She understands the court of public opinion better than almost anyone I know. She knows how to mold a jury. You can't keep her at bay. You need her. And we both know she will do anything for you."

I nod.

“She doesn’t need your protection,” Cassidy says.

“No. But she deserves my caution. People haven’t been fair to Jess. Their loyalty to me blinded them. Don’t misunderstand me. It hurt. Knowing she was cheating on me hurt—confronting it day after day in the press was brutal. Maybe, on some level, she wanted to hurt me. Deep down, I think she just wanted me to pay attention.”

Cassidy grasps my hand. “I see the ghosts in your eyes,” she says. “You’re worried about JD and the kids—about what all the ugliness will bring. You need to let people fight for you once in a while, not just with you. And as much as you might want to fly home and curl up with JD, I think you need to be here—boring candidates and all. You’ll see her tomorrow.”

Cassidy is right. I’m about to reply when Luke enters the room again. He’s flushed.

“I don’t want to know,” I tell Luke.

“You’re not going to the rally.”

“Luke.”

“Candace, you can’t go because it’s been postponed.”

“Why?” I ask.

Luke huffs. “Do you want me to tell you, or should I turn on the television?”

I sigh. “Put it on.”

“Jesus,” Cassidy mutters.

The first image that greets us is a young teenager with a bloody face; behind her, a police officer in riot gear is on the ground.

“How did this happen?” I ask Luke.

“I don’t know all the details,” he replies. Todd and Ryan are working on it. “Initial reports suggest it started with a pushing match between one of the ABL members and a counter-protestor. It spilled over to some rallygoers who were lining up.”

“Why on earth would that protest that close to the event line?” I demand.

“I don’t know,” Luke says. “I promise I will find out.”

Ryan walks in, sporting a grimace.

“Ryan?” I ask.

“Madam President.” Ryan takes a deep breath.

“Just tell me,” I say.

“A twelve-year-old girl is on her way to the hospital,” Ryan tells me.

I wait.

“Agent Standish believes she was hit with a projectile. There were no firearms at play. We won’t know anything until she’s treated.”

“How serious?” I ask.

“It went into her shoulder. It’s not life-threatening,” Ryan replies.

“But?”

“There are six more people who require medical intervention. Two protestors, a counter-protester, and three rallygoers.”

I need to take a few deep breaths before I respond. “Ryan,” I begin calmly. “I want to know everything there is to know about the security plans for that event. Everything. I want you to call Alex. Now.”

“Madam President?”

“Call Alex.”

“Shouldn’t I call Director Brennan?”

“Alex, Ryan. I’ll deal with the director.”

“Ma’am.”

I look at Luke. “Get me the director on the phone.”

“Madam President.”

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“Stop it,” I say. “I don’t need to be reminded of my title.”

I hear Cassidy snigger despite the situation. I’m furious. They should know by now to follow my instructions and stop addressing me like a toddler. I often wonder if male presidents suffer the same preemptive scolding when they give an order.

“I’ll get the Director Brennan on the line,” Luke says. “The Secret Service doesn’t handle permits.”

Is he trying to piss me off?

I steady my voice. “Luke.” Another deep breath. “I’m aware of how permitting for events works. I’m also well-versed in how the Secret Service works with local law enforcement. I don’t need a picture or a lesson.”

“I didn’t?—”

“Don’t,” I warn him. “You were here advocating for why I should reconsider attending this event. Is there something you haven’t told me?”

“What? No.”

“No? Because this debacle doesn’t instill confidence in the Secret Service’s ability to secure an event,” I say.

“I’m sure the arena was secure.”

My voice raises. “The arena?”

“You would not have traveled this route?—”

I feel Cassidy tense beside me.

“Earlier today, I reflected on how selecting you as my chief of staff was one of my best decisions. Please don’t make me second-guess that.”

“I’m only saying?—”

“I know where this is heading. The entire event should be secure—not just for my safety—not only for a candidate’s safety. If it’s unsafe for anyone, it poses a danger to everyone. Am I clear?”

“Crystal,” Luke says.

“Get me the director.”

Luke nods, exhales, and jogs out of the room.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Candace?”

“This didn’t happen without a little nudge, Cassidy. We both know it.”

“I agree.”

Since the bombing in New York a few months ago, my National Security team suspects there is an issue within the Secret Service- someone willing to compromise

my security. No one can convince me that a known hate group got close enough to an event where I am set to speak without someone allowing it. It wasn't an oversight. And it wasn't negligence. It was deliberate. No question.

"What are you thinking?" Cassidy asks me.

"I'm betting my appearances for the weekend will be canceled."

"Safe bet. What are you thinking?"

"We need a plan to get back out here," I tell Cassidy. "And I'm about to give Ryan and Luke a migraine."

Cassidy laughs. "Let me guess. You want to meet the girl who was hurt."

"Good guess. I doubt that will happen this weekend. I need to ask you to do something a bit unorthodox."

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“Is that new?”

I chuckle. “Fair. Would you call Tom Brigg’s campaign manager?”

Cassidy smiles. “On it. Do you mind if I step into the bedroom?”

“Nope. I doubt I’ll see it any time soon,” I reply just as Luke appears in the doorway.

“Director Brennan is expecting your call,” Luke says.

“Thank you. Give me the room for a few moments.”

Luke nods and closes the door. Can’t anything go according to plan?

I’m relieved when I have a minute to call Jameson. “Hi.”

“Rough day, huh,” Jameson says.

“Not the worst. Certainly not the best.”

“Any more information?”

“We have people on the ground assessing what happened. The advance team should have nixed those permits. There’s no way the ABL should have been that close to the arena. Things happen, Jameson. I know that. This was preventable.”

“Is it going to fall on you?”

“No. Not this time. The blowback seems to be directed at local law enforcement. That doesn’t mean it should be directed at them, at least not solely,” I reply.

“Are you worried about being out there?”

“No. This wasn’t an accident, though. I have my suspicions. I’ll wait for the team’s assessment to make a final judgment.”

“Suspicions?” Jameson asks.

“This wasn’t about me—not in a physical sense. It is about this election—and the next one. Too many things in this circumstance don’t add up for me. There is something I need to ask you.”

“What do you need?”

“Cassidy and Luke have been working with Tom Briggs’s team all afternoon. The rally will be rescheduled for Thursday. I’d hoped you would join me.”

“I’ll have Master Jinx check my schedule,” Jameson teases me.

I chuckle. Jameson has started bringing Jinx into her office a few days a week, so he won’t be lonely. He seems to rule the East Wing these days. I’m still unsure who gave Jinx a lift to the West Wing last week. He spent two hours sleeping under my desk in the Oval Office. I could lie and say it annoyed me. It felt like a touch of much-needed normalcy in an otherwise hectic and sometimes surreal existence.

“Thank you for consulting Jinx.”

Jameson laughs. “So, you’re headed home tomorrow?”

“It looks that way,” I reply. “Jameson?”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

“For?”

“Reaching out to Jess.”

“You’re welcome,” Jameson says. “Are you okay?”

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“I’m frustrated by what happened today,” I confess. It’s not much of a confession. Anyone who knows me could guess the day’s events would trouble and frustrate me.

“How’s the girl who got injured?”

“Home. That’s part of the reason I want you to make the trip with me.”

“Oh?”

“It seems Ava Porter wants to be an architect,” I explain. “Her mother told me she’s developed a fascination with the First Lady.”

Jameson chuckles.

“I think Ava hoped you might make an appearance at today’s event,” I tell Jameson.

“Should I bring some of my plans?”

“I think she might prefer to show you hers.”

“Maybe Mel or Jonah should come to conduct an interview,” Jameson quips.

“Actually, that might not be a bad idea.”

“You want Mel to hire a twelve-year-old? Candace, I thought you supported child labor laws.”

I laugh. “Lunatic.”

“Me? You’re the one who suggested hiring a pre-teen.”

“Maybe we should consider having Ava visit DC,” Candace said. “Mel could show her around the office, and you could show her around the White House.”

Jameson chuckles, and then she sighs. “It isn’t your fault she got hurt.”

“I know”

“Do you?”

“Yes,” I reply. “She’s a kid, Jameson—a kid who was excited to attend a political rally for one of the driest people in public life I’ve ever met.”

I hear Jameson snigger. She’s met Tomm Briggs.

“It doesn’t matter what excited her about attending. She asked her mother to bring her. Maybe your absence would have been a disappointment, but?—”

“Candace.”

“I’m serious. She was excited enough to take time out on a Saturday, willing to wait in line for a few hours to go to that rally. She left with a lasting memory—a traumatic one. I don’t want her lifelong impression of political involvement to be traumatic.”

“I love you.”

“What?”

“What do you mean—what?” Jameson returns. “I think it’s great idea. Maybe you should expand it a little.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there might not be a lot of twelve-year-olds fascinated by me. I’m sure some are interested in architecture.”

“Go on.”

“Why not have a small group of kids in that age range visit the White House? I can take them on a tour and explain the building from an architectural standpoint—maybe I can help them sketch a plan. If you just have Ava visit, it will look like you’re capitalizing on her misfortune. We could even have the kids stay for dinner with their parents—something informal like a pizza party,” Jameson suggests.

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Jameson will tell anyone who cares to listen that politics have never interested her—not beyond her duties in the voting booth. She possesses some of the best political instincts I’ve ever encountered. It reminds me that there is a deep well of untapped political talent that we seldom seek to tap. She’s insightful. I always say politics is about people. Jameson is outgoing but doesn’t enjoy being on stage; she prefers to observe what’s happening around her. I couldn’t have chosen a better partner for this journey into the White House. It’s funny. She’d much rather be tinkering on a project in the old barn back in Schoharie than attending State Dinners or making public speeches. She has a unique way of bringing politics home. Her idea is brilliant. It’s heartfelt.

“Bad idea?” Jameson asks.

“No. I think it’s a brilliant idea. I’m wondering why you don’t run for office—or run my next campaign.”

“No thanks.”

“I’m serious,” I say.

“No, you aren’t,” she returns. “But you are sincere. No way. I am more than happy to play tour guide for an afternoon.”

“And get pizza as a reward.”

“It’s a bonus. Can we partner with Rossi’s?” Jameson asks.

I giggle at the whimsical tone in Jameson's voice. Rossi's is a popular Italian restaurant near our townhome in Arlington. One thing I know frustrates Jameson is the act of Congress required to order a pizza at the White House. Everything must be planned, checked, and approved. Scheduling a pizza party gives her an excuse to order her favorite food.

"Come on, Candace. It'll be great! You can tout your support of small business at the same time!"

That does it; I burst out laughing.

"Why is that funny?" Jameson asks.

"You really are a lunatic, honey."

"Maybe I'm just hungry."

This is why I love Jameson so much. She is authentic to her core. No one has made me laugh as earnestly or as often as Jameson. It's been a stressful day. She knows this without me uttering a word, and she also knows how to replace the strain with humor—if only for a few moments.

"Thank you," I tell her.

"No thanks necessary. Rossi's will do."

I chuckle. "Tell you a secret?"

"Is it classified?"

"Not this one. I'm glad I'll be home early," I confess. "Maybe I can make lasagna."

“Maybe you should just come home and let me and Coop handle dinner.”

“You mean I should let you call the kitchen.”

“No. We can cook for you,” Jameson says. “Scared?”

I’m not scared at all. I know what will happen: either I will be served mac and cheese and hot dogs, or Pearl will rescue them with lasagna or a casserole. I’m confident Jameson could master the kitchen beyond designing or building one. She prefers to fix the sink, install the cabinets, or create a new table and let me handle the baking and cooking. I don’t mind. It’s one thing I miss about being home. I appreciate the fact that my family wants me to take time off. Cooking doesn’t feel like work for me. It gives me a sense of being at home.

“I appreciate the offer. Let me handle dinner tomorrow,” I request.

“Far be it from me to turn down lasagna. Sundaes and Monopoly after dinner?”

“Hoping to send me to the cleaners again?” I ask.

“Well, you were a lawyer. You should’ve posted bail.”

The last time we spent an evening playing Monopoly, I was sent to jail every other turn. Cooper ended up owning almost every property and bankrupting both Jameson and me in record time.

“Maybe we should skip Monopoly and head to a galaxy far, far away with our sundaes.”

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“Oh, I get it. You want to be the president who reaches Mars.”

“Well, it might be a nice vacation spot.”

“Mm. You need money for that, Candace. I think you should practice your economic policy first.”

I laugh. “We’ll negotiate over dinner,” I promise. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ll be here. Candace?”

“Yes?”

“Just remember one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Every election is about economics.”

“Goodnight, Jameson.”

“Economics, Candace.”

I shake my head and chuckle. I’ve barely disconnected the call when my phone rings.

“Yes?” I ask.

“I love you,” Jameson says.

I close my eyes. “I love you, too.”

“What if I promise to slip you a Get out of Jail free card?”

I laugh. “Goodnight, Jameson.”

Chapter Five

Jameson

I admit I thought the excitement of Candace’s helicopter landing on the South Lawn would fade with time, but it never does. Cooper loves to watch Candace step off the helicopter and across the lawn. It is a sight that reminds me of my wife’s power—the sight of the three helicopters as they approach—the layers of security ensuring her safety. I always feel a lump in my throat when a young Marine descends the stairs and stands at attention as Candace exits. After two years of living here, I’m awestruck every time.

You might think I’d have moved on by now. Traveling with her is a different experience than watching her. For a moment, I’m just like any American, waiting for the president to appear. Then I see my wife.

I never spent time daydreaming about fairytale romances. It’s not that I didn’t hope to fall in love. Daydreams are often influenced by the expectations of the people around us. It’s strange when I think about it. I don’t recall my parents or grandparents commenting on the handsome man who would win my heart, wedding dresses, or future grandkids. My parents followed my lead. I wanted to keep up with my cousins. They played football. I played football. They played basketball. I played basketball. They helped my dad with construction projects. I refused to be left out. And I loved it.

The truth is, I didn't do much daydreaming. Scott dreamed of becoming an astronaut. My brother Doug fantasized about being an NFL quarterback. I was always focused on my next goal. I wanted to make the basketball team, so I practiced diligently. I was determined to get into Cornell, so I studied hard. I noticed girls at school, but few captured my interest; I was too busy avoiding my own truth. In college, I dated and had a couple of girlfriends, but I didn't fantasize about spending a lifetime together. Then I met Candace.

Do you know how people say someone can command a room, making you feel their presence the moment they enter? Candace doesn't need the dramatic descent of Marine One onto the White House lawn or the backdrop of Air Force One to capture attention. You can sense her presence when she walks down the hallway in a pair of flannel pajamas. I've never met anyone quite like her. I felt it the first time she opened her front door for me. It's easy to overlook the power she wields as president and the weight that responsibility places on her shoulders—even for me.

We constantly search for ways to make this existence feel normal—a game of Monopoly, ice cream sundaes in the afternoon, making lasagna, or watching movies with Cooper. The backdrop never lets you forget where you are—who she is. It's always present—Candace is the President of the United States. I don't often think about it that way. It's her job. But it's so much more than that. As I watch her appear in the doorway of Marine One, I'm reminded that she'll be in our grandchildren's history books. People will teach college classes about her ascension to the presidency. Numerous books have already been written about her. She's a curiosity for many—someone's hero, another's villain. For me and Coop, she's everything. She belongs to something—to the broader world in ways that not many will ever claim.

I take a deep breath.

“Mom?” Cooper asks.

“Huh?”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m good, Coop. Just happy to have your mom home.”

“Yeah. Me too,” Coop agrees.

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He looks at Mackenzie. His eyes are bright—almost glassy. It's an adorable childhood crush, but his friendship with Mackenzie Toles goes much deeper. I don't predict they'll defy all the odds and wind up the centerpiece of an epic romance, although stranger things have happened. Look at me. Mackenzie is his best friend. They understand each other. It's funny. I've heard Cassidy comment many times that Mackenzie worships Alex. Candace says the same thing about how Cooper is with me. That's because he emulates me. I do see it. Mackenzie tries to be like Alex, too. But Candace and Cassidy are both missing something obvious to me. Mackenzie loves Cassidy the way Coop does Candace.

“Hey, there's your mom,” Cooper tells Mackenzie.

Candace walks beside Cassidy, laughing. I'm grateful that Cassidy agreed to be part of Candace's team. It's been good for them both. But I also recognize that there is a trade-off. Cassidy's role in the administration alters their dynamic as friends. That's another reason I think it's helpful for Candace to have Jessica in her life. An outside perspective is something Candace needs.

Candace looks at me and smiles. I can read her body language—relief. She's eager to prepare dinner in the family kitchen. I doubt she minds whether we end the night with board game, a movie, or some other activity—as long as it's paired with ice cream.

Coop tries to be cool—more like a teenager than the nine-year-old we love. I'm sure that's mainly for Mackenzie's benefit. But I can see hints of the little boy we brought home, clutching a stuffed frog. I know he loves me, and God knows I love him. Candace is his person. I understand. Sharing her with a large family isn't easy. Sharing his mom with the entire world is even harder. He does it with a grace that mirrors his

mother's. I think Coop is an old soul—if such a thing exists. It's another way he and Mackenzie are alike. I fight back the urge to laugh as I watch them try to walk coolly to their moms. They'd love to sprint across the lawn. They don't. I get it. I feel the same way.

“Hey, there,” Candace greets Cooper.

“Hi, Mom,” Mackenzie says, accepting a hug from Cassidy.

“I thought we could use a few more players for Monopoly,” I explain.

“Mm,” Candace hums. She kisses me lightly.

“Monopoly?” Cassidy asks.

“Yeah, Mom,” Mackenzie says. “Coop says Aunt Candace usually spends all her time in jail.”

Candace rolls her eyes.

“Don't worry,” Cassidy says. “Last time the kids got me to play, I picked a card every turn and paid someone else's rent.”

Candace laughs. “Well, in that case, we should have a glass of wine while I make dinner—before I'm in the slammer and you're on the street.”

I laugh as I trail behind the group.

“Ms. Reid?”

I look over my shoulder to see Paul Pfieffer, one of Candace's aides, running to reach

me.

“Paul.”

“I know you’re probably anxious to get inside,” he says.

“Not so much,” I tell him. “It seems my wife and her press secretary have a kitchen date with Chardonnay.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Never mind. What can I do for you?” I wonder.

“Well, the president asked me to talk to you about setting up a tour for some students.”

“Mm. Today?” I ask.

“What?”

“Do you need me to conduct a tour today?”

“Oh. No.”

I hold back a chuckle. Paul can’t be much older than twenty-two. He’s the son of Luke’s college roommate, and he’s more eager to please Candace than she is to uncork that bottle of wine.

“How about we schedule a time to talk tomorrow?” I suggest.

“Oh. Sure.”

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“Why don’t you come slumming around 10?”

Paul looks confused. I forget not everyone understands my sense of humor.

“To the East Wing,” I explain. “My office isn’t an oval. I do have coffee,” I promise him. “And I’ll let you in on a secret.”

His ears perk.

“Jameson!” Candace calls out to me.”

“My coffee is better,” I tell Paul before jogging to catch up with Candace.

“Please tell me you didn’t scare Paul,” Candace says.

“Scare him? I invited him to go slumming.”

Candace shakes her head and laughs. “You are an architect, honey. If you really want an oval-shaped office, design one.”

Believe me, if they’d let me, I would.

I’m not sure if it’s the trip, the marathon Monopoly game, or the extra-large sundaes we ate, but neither Candace nor I seem to have much energy, and it’s only nine.

“I’m sorry to be the party pooper,” Candace says. “I think my tiredness found my exhaustion somewhere near the Boardwalk.”

I chuckle and pull Candace into my arms. “Don’t apologize.”

“I think tomorrow will be a late morning for me.”

“You need to get some sleep,” I tell her.

“I wish my mind would let me.”

“Candace? What haven’t you told me?”

“Jonathan called me early this morning.”

I take a deep breath and hold it.

“He’s hiring someone to stay with him full time, starting next week,” Candace says.

“Are things progressing?”

“I don’t know. He said he wasn’t in any pain. He’s tired, Jameson. Marianne wanted him to stay with them. He doesn’t want the grandkids to see him sick.”

“I don’t blame him.”

“Neither do I. But you know our kids want to be there for him—with him—Marianne most of all.”

“I know, but I also understand how Jonathan feels. Marianne went through hell with Rick. Jonathan saw what that did to her.”

“Yes, but Marianne made it through that, Jameson—stronger.”

“Maybe. Watching her dad die is bound to bring up some serious baggage.”

Candace sighs. “I wish I knew what to do.”

“You can’t fix everything. You know that better than most people. Just be there for them.”

“Easier said than done.”

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“No one expects you to drop everything and fly to Connecticut. Just be available to listen. That’s the best you can do for all of them. That’s not the only thing that has you wiped out tonight.”

“I’m worried about the election.”

“This one or the next one?” I ask.

“Both.”

“About losing?”

“That, too,” Candace admits. She shifts to look at me.

“Did you find out more about what happened with the protestors?”

“Nothing specific. I don’t really need the specifics to know we have an issue.”

“What kind of issue?”

“People say they want substance, Jameson—they want solutions. Sometimes, they fall prey to the spectacle. That’s what Klein is counting on. Making me the extremist.”

I sit up. “You? Come on, Candace. The American Brethren are self-proclaimed white supremacists. How on earth is Lawson Klein, or anyone for that matter, going to turn you into the extremist.”

Candace groans,

“Candace?”

“They seemeas the extreme.”

“Because you’re married to me?” I ask.

“It’s everything I represent and believe,” Candace replies. “They want to paint themselves as the resistance.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“It may be ridiculous. It also may prove effective.”

“You can’t be serious.”

Candace flops back onto the mattress with a sigh.

I want to press the issue, but I won’t. I want to lighten her mood with a fortune cookie or a joke, but that’s not what she needs from me. Not now. I collapse beside her and kiss her softly. “Let it go for now.”

Candace folds herself into my arms and closes her eyes.

“I love you for wanting to take care of everyone. Sometimes, you need to let someone take care of you. Don’t say anything,” I tell her.

“Pot, meet kettle,” she quips.

“Maybe so,” I concede. “I let you cook dinner, didn’t I?”

“You did.”

“Because I knew you needed to take care of us tonight. I knew you needed to be Coop’s mom and not the president for a few hours.”

“I wish I could escape sometimes,” Candace confesses.

“The White House?”

“No. My brain.”

I laugh.

“It is a maze up there,” I say.

Candace finally chuckles and whacks me softly. “Kind of like your mouse house, huh?”

“Mm. I never thought about it. Maybe. Maybe that’s why you had Dana steal Jinx from my office and secretly snuck him into yours—to keep the wheels from spinning so fast.”

“Maybe so.”

“Close your eyes,” I tell her. “Rest. Think about me naked.”

Candace laughs. “That won’t lead to rest, Jameson.”

I kiss Candace’s temple. “I think we’re both too tired to study scripture tonight.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Would you stop? There’s always morning. They have sunrise services for a reason, you know?”

I feel Candace shaking with laughter against me.

“I can schedule a wake-up call?—”

Candace stretches to kiss me. “Lunatic.”

“It takes a little lunacy to live here,” I reply.

“That it does.”

I pull Candace back into my arms. “Get some rest, Candace. We hit the campaign trail together in a few days. No doubt someone will raise the issue of your relationship with God. We’ll need to prepare, you know.”

I expect a clever reply, but the only sound I hear is a contented snore. I smile, feeling suddenly excited about the campaign trail and the sunrise.

To Be Continued.....