



# The Senator's Rival

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**Category:** Erotic, Romance, Lesbian Romance

**Description:** Two presidential candidates, one steamy affair – how much will they risk for love?

You'll love this steamy Enemies to Lovers Age Gap Ice Queen Opposites Attract Romance between two of the most powerful women in the world. Steamy, loving and always a happy ever after. Senator Francesca Thurston is embroiled in a battle to be the first female president of the United States with frosty Ice Queen Congresswoman Margot Smith. Francesca is a trailblazer, being an openly gay senator. What she doesn't expect is the immediate chemistry she feels on her first meeting with Margot. Francesca doesn't like Margot and her tendency to stoop to underhand methods to get what she wants, but she can't resist the lure of the icy older woman. If anyone caught them together it would destroy everything they had fought their whole lives to build. When things heat up in the battle to become president, who will win? And will Francesca be able to stay away from the complicated desire she has for her rival?

**Total Pages (Source):** 29

## FRANCESCA

“There has never been a more crucial time than now for our voices to be heard,” Francesca Thurston’s impassioned, confident voice rang out throughout the arena. “Each and every one of us has the power to change history and shape a better future for ourselves and those who follow, and we can, together, create an America in which no person is excluded or forgotten!”

The crowd exploded with applause, cheering and chanting the speaker's name in admiration. An easygoing smile on her face, Francesca fell silent and looked out at the gathered onlookers with pride. This rally was their largest yet, with over ten thousand people in attendance, in addition to countless viewers watching online.

Maybe holding a rally in her home state of Massachusetts was a bit of narcissistic indulgence that wasn't strictly necessary for the campaign, but it definitely helped boost morale among Francesca’s teammates and volunteers. Now, at 42 years old, it felt amazing to get a resounding show of support from the locals who had known her since she'd first stepped into politics almost two decades ago.

After taking a moment to bask in the excitement, Francesca nodded approvingly at the audience and said, “I am honored to officially accept your nomination for presidential candidate. With your help and support, we will create a country in which equality and unity can become a reality, rather than a pipe dream!”

This time, the roar of applause was deafening. In the bright spotlight, it was almost

impossible to make out individual faces among the mass of supporters. There were nothing but blurry blobs in front of Francesca. The energy was palpable, however--an incomparable stream of positive momentum that flowed from the crowd and directly into her. She stood still, grinning, arms outstretched with gratitude as the people showered her with praise.

This wasn't why Francesca had gotten into politics. She came from a long line of activists and influential political figures driven by passion and principles instead of fame, and was determined to carry on that legacy. Nonetheless, now that she was here, Francesca had to admit that this sort of recognition was a delightful bonus. Honestly, who wouldn't enjoy standing up in front of thousands and having them cheer you on? Being a senator was often thankless work, with far more complaints and insults from the general public than accolades and compliments, and Francesca was realistic enough to recognize that the presidency would be more of the same.

In these moments on the campaign trail, however, it was lovely to just bask for a few minutes. To really savor the moment and take it all in. The rush, the attention, the hope, and the love. No matter what happened going forward, Francesca had created and nurtured this movement. And it had thrived, spreading far beyond its roots and expanding into a national force hoping to elect her as president. Despite everything that could go wrong--the possibility of failure due to the sheer magnitude of the responsibility--all she could feel right now was pure, undiluted joy.

“Thank you all so much!” Francesca finally called out. “God bless you all, and bless the United States of America!”

They went wild for it. With a broad smile and a wave, she descended off the stage, brushing off her elegant navy blue pantsuit and smoothing down her sleek, dark brown bob. Her assistants huddled around, helping tidy her appearance before they got to the lobby where Francesca would be meeting with her key sponsors and staff for drinks and light refreshments. The team buzzed around her with excitement as

they strode through the winding halls of the arena. Everyone seemed invigorated by the energy and enthusiasm from the crowd, talking and laughing with renewed vigor and purpose and congratulating Francesca and each other on yet another successful rally.

“Absolutely perfect speech, Frankie,” her campaign manager, Juliet, said with satisfaction. The wispy brunette was clutching her clipboard to her chest and walking quickly, her kitten heels clacking against the floor. “The sound was great, the lighting was good, and the audience responded to everything you said. The part about access to affordable childcare is going to generate positive press. Should help our polling with on-the-fence suburban moms.”

“Bless you, Jules, what would I do without you?” Francesca laughed, patting her old friend's shoulder fondly. Juliet had managed several of her past campaigns, and their familiarity with each other bred comfort and ease. “The crowd really turned out for us tonight, didn't they?” Francesca added thoughtfully as she followed Juliet down the hall.

“You're on your home turf here. Would've been worried if we didn't have a solid turnout,” Juliet added sardonically, arching a manicured eyebrow. “This place is already yours. Maine next week is going to?”

“Yes, Jules, I know,” Francesca sighed, giving an exasperated chuckle. “Let me have this one for now, all right? Can we save the doom and gloom for tomorrow morning, when we're looking at numbers?”

“Yes, ma'am,” Juliet replied with a smirk.

They strolled down the corridor until they reached the door to the lobby. Before going through, Francesca's team swarmed her, doing light touch-ups to hair and makeup and quickly running through the names of important attendees so that she

could remember names and faces on sight. They made sure that her suit was immaculate and unwrinkled. As always, Francesca took in the information with practiced ease, nodding along and muttering affirmatives in reply to any questions. Smiling graciously for everyone involved.

She had been a public figure for most of her adult life and was accustomed to this sort of thing. Even as a child, media appearances and political functions had been fairly routine. The Thurston family name was practically synonymous with American politics. Her grandfather had been a renowned civil rights advocate and one of the longest-sitting senators in modern history, pushing through several acts of major legislation during his tenure. Her dad had been a similarly prominent governor of New Hampshire, her home state. High-level politics ran in her blood and she had grown up in the midst of it, soaking in the atmosphere and learning every nuance almost by absorption.

It had given Francesca a thick skin and a keen understanding of what to expect from the press, the public, and other politicians. Mingling with donors and lobbyists was second nature to her, so when she stepped through the door to the waiting crowd, Francesca automatically flashed a smile--as though she had been born for this specific scene. Which was pretty much true. She shook hands, exchanged pleasantries, and received hugs, making sure to greet people by their first names as if they were lifelong friends. Taking an interest in the life of every person she spoke to. Francesca's handshake was strong and firm, her dark brown eyes remaining fixed on whomever was speaking.

Her demeanor had been practiced, of course, because it would be madness to run a presidential campaign without any kind of preparation or media training. Still, Francesca truly did enjoy interacting with people this way. She liked getting to know people and was genuinely interested in learning about her sponsors and followers. Getting to know the people supporting her campaign and understanding their hopes and dreams made the entire venture so much more than a job. It made Francesca feel

proud of the campaign, of the movement they were building, and of the promise of good things to come. The future of the world itself might be better if things went according to plan.

“So glad you could attend this evening, Robert,” she said to an older gentleman, shaking his hand firmly. “How's your daughter enjoying college? Did she pick a major yet?”

“Business, surprisingly!” he exclaimed, laughing at himself as he straightened his tie. “You're an inspiration to these young people, Francesca. It means a lot to my Emily to see someone like you breaking the mold--stepping out on a limb and being true to yourself.”

It was easy to smile at that. Of course, Francesca knew that not everyone shared his opinion. The majority of the conservative base was against her, simply due to her sexuality. Being the first openly gay woman to be nominated as a presidential candidate was controversial and she was often met with harsh criticism, particularly within certain religious circles. That was to be expected, however, and it didn't hurt any more than it would damage a duck's feathers to be splashed with water.

Early on in her political career, Francesca had made the decision to live authentically and proudly. Since then, she had stuck to her guns. Despite anyone's objections, she had won her party's official nomination by a landslide. To her supporters, her experience, charisma, and long list of accomplishments spoke for themselves, so they backed her as their champion without reservation. Winning over the swing states would be tricky, of course, but if anyone was up to the challenge, it was her.

For about an hour, Francesca walked around the lobby, meeting with donors and interacting with her team. Greeting a few members of the press who had been invited to report on the event. Photographers took pictures, reporters asked questions, and her team followed her diligently to make sure she interacted with everyone she should.

Everyone who wanted a handshake, a hug, or a few moments of Francesca's time received it, and she kept a congenial smile on her face throughout.

After the final group photos had been taken and the last potential donor greeted, Francesca finally waved goodbye and headed out to her car. On her way through the winding streets of Boston, she leaned back and closed her eyes, taking a moment to rest and reflect on the last few whirlwind days. It had been a flurry of TV appearances, speeches, phone calls, and strategy meetings. But she was officially a presidential candidate who was backed by her party. Despite all the planning and campaigning that had gone into making this happen, it still felt surreal.

The car arrived at the restaurant and her driver stepped out, opening Francesca's door for her. She stepped out onto the sidewalk and took a deep breath, letting the cool evening air wash over her. Then she walked inside, where her family was waiting.

At a large table sat three young adults of mixed race who looked so different from each other that they had rarely been taken for siblings when they were kids. This might have been because their mother's side of the family was Irish or Scottish looking, with pale skin, freckles, and red hair. Meanwhile, their father's side of the family was black, with dark skin and tightly coiled hair. Like most black people with ancestors from the South, slavery had been part of his family's history.

As a result, the Thurston siblings didn't look very much like each other. Instead, they resembled a mosaic of humanity with all its shades, textures, and hues. Eleanor and Samuel, the two youngest, were probably the most different from each other in looks—Eleanor was the spitting image of their mother, just a bit darker, while Samuel was nearly a mirror image of their father. Francesca and Marcus both straddled the middle ground. Marcus's skin was a bit darker than Francesca's, while her hair was a bit straighter. However, they were of similar height and build and shared the same defined jawlines, almond-shaped brown eyes, and high cheekbones.

“I’m telling you, Elle, it’s about precedent. The case in 1986 set the tone for—” came Samuel’s voice.



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“Okay, yes, I get that, but there's also the question of whether that precedent is actually applicable in this situation,” Eleanor interrupted her brother’s impassioned rant. “I mean, the scope has changed so much since then, and?—”

“Well, if you want to be technical about it, there are ways to interpret the law so that the precedent still holds true,” Samuel argued. “It's all about the wording of the statutes, and?—”

“Good evening,” Francesca interjected with a chuckle as she took the empty chair between her arguing siblings. “Have these two been at it all night again?” she asked Marcus.

His pained expression answered her question with no words necessary. Marcus slumped back in his chair, holding his wine glass, looking half-exhausted and half-resigned. There was no way to interrupt Eleanor and Samuel when they got started on the subject of congressional law. Eleanor was a public defender, while Samuel was an assistant professor of law at Harvard. This meant that they both had a vested interest in the topic and could always find something new to debate.

“I see,” Francesca murmured, nodding her head toward Marcus and pursing her lips in sympathy.

“Great speech, Frankie,” Eleanor said, reaching over to squeeze her sister's arm. Eleanor was grinning broadly and looked sincerely proud. “A toast to our big sister, the next President of the United States!”

“Hear, hear!” the other two chimed in, clinking their glasses together in a chorus of

cheers.

“We've still got a long way to go before that happens,” Francesca reminded them, though she couldn't help but smile and flush with delight at the thought. “There is a lot of hard work ahead of us.”

“And we'll be with you every step of the way,” Marcus assured her with a nod, patting her shoulder in a show of support. “What do you need from us, boss?” he teased.

“Just keep doing what you're doing,” Francesca told him with a small laugh, “and try not to cause any major scandals that might derail the campaign. Steer clear of drugs, affairs, and money laundering--or I'm going to have you all in prison by election day.”

They all laughed and launched into a discussion of the campaign, which lasted throughout the meal. Their family had grown up in the heart of politics, so they all had a solid grasp of how the system worked and how the game was played, as well as a clear understanding of public perception and how to navigate the potential minefields that came with being a family member of a high-ranking government figures. In truth, Francesca wasn't worried about any of them. Each sibling had dedicated his or her life to serving others and advocating for civil rights and political enfranchisement in one way or another. None of them were going to do anything to jeopardize her campaign.

It was comforting to have her family supporting her this closely. Despite growing up in the eye of the American political storm, the Thurstons were a tight-knit bunch who had always been there for one another, no matter what. With their parents so busy, the kids had they relied upon each other, supporting and building each other up as they pursued their ambitions. It was an incredible blessing to have such a strong foundation to fall back on.

“So, who do we think you'll be facing off against, Frankie?” Samuel asked, as they were eating dessert, a delicious chocolate mousse with vanilla ice cream.

“There's no question,” Marcus replied with an eye roll. He was a political analyst by trade, working at a leading network as a political correspondent. “Smith is a shoe-in. She's been ahead by a wide margin ever since Bennett dropped out of the race. Everyone else is too far behind to be serious competition.”

“Those embezzlement rumors came out at an awfully convenient time for her, didn't they?” Eleanor chimed in, arching an eyebrow. “Smith was falling behind because of that stuff about her not representing the interests of rural conservatives--then all of a sudden, her only competitor has been taking bribes from pharmaceutical companies?”

Francesca shrugged noncommittally at that. Tim Bennett had been a clear frontrunner—exactly the kind of traditional, establishment-type candidate with no fresh ideas or strategies. The kind of guy their opponents usually salivated over. And there was no doubt that Margot Smith was a snake in the grass. She had cut her teeth in Congress and done everything right from there on out. Smith had toed the party line and had avoided controversy by hiding in the background. She'd positioned herself as a reliable ally, while making just the right promises to win votes. But at this point, Smith was running practically unopposed. The timing of the revelations about Tim Bennett seemed a bit too serendipitous.

“Well, more shocking things have happened than a rich white conservative man engaging in quid pro quos with Wall Street,” Francesca pointed out wryly. “It certainly doesn't make Smith look good, but we can't be the ones to draw attention to it. We can't afford even the appearance of playing dirty, so we can't back any conspiracy theories.”

“True enough,” Marcus agreed with a sigh, “but we need to be prepared for Smith to do whatever she needs to do, Frankie. Taking the high road is admirable and all, but

this is a woman who'll stab you in the back, kick you when you're down, and spit on your corpse as you lie dying to ensure she comes out on top.”

Francesca laughed at that vivid description, leaning back in her chair as she swallowed a sip of wine. “I have nothing but the utmost respect for my opponent's ambition and ingenuity,” she declared theatrically, painting on her most winning, amicable politician smile. “She is a fierce woman and a worthy competitor.”

They all laughed at that, exchanging conspiratorial grins. It was a thrilling moment, imagining what might come of the election and everything it could lead to. After years of struggle and frustration, progress seemed to be on the rise. Francesca's campaign was emblematic of a shift toward a brighter future. Whomever she faced off against, Francesca would be prepared. She had faith in the power of democracy, the strength of her supporters, and the undeniable appeal of her message, and she was ready for the challenge awaiting her.

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## MARGOT

Margot Smith was sitting at the large wooden desk in front of the camera dressed all in white. The sun shone brightly behind her, and her position had been angled precisely so that the light formed a glowing aura—her immaculately highlighted golden brown waves framing her perfectly sculpted features. Margot's fair skin seemed to glow, as if kissed by sunshine, and when she smiled, her full lips parted to display pearly-white teeth. Faint laugh lines marked the edges of her striking blue eyes, giving her face just enough character that her beauty wouldn't be blindingly intimidating to the average viewer.

Some people might say she looked like an angel, and that she exuded wisdom, grace, and purity. However, Margot herself would never be so gauche as to say such a

thing—that would be vapid and self-centered—but, you know, she'd heard people say that about her. And who was she to argue with the voice of the public?

“Good morning, America,” Margot announced in a honey-sweet tone tinged a faint, but not too distinct, Southern accent. She made direct eye contact with the viewers and maintained her steady gaze through the introduction. “My name is Margot Smith. It is an honor and a privilege to sit here today before you, on behalf of the great state of Virginia, as I accept my party's nomination to run for President of the United States. This election year, many of us have come to understand that there is a deeply-rooted disconnect between the concerns of the hard-working families who reside within our borders, and those policymakers whose decisions will drastically impact their futures. We feel, as one unified party, that it is time for a change. This November, we will offer a different choice for America. A choice for unity, and hope, and opportunity.”

Every word had been carefully selected and clearly enunciated, carrying a specific weight, pitch, and rhythm as it rang throughout the room. Everyone in the studio was focused on Margot Smith and the screen with her image, watching intently as the narrative she crafted unfolded. Even the people standing in the background were absolutely silent, knowing that a stray cough or a creaking footstep could throw off her entire delivery. Because this particular address needed to be perfect. In fact, everything Margot touched needed to be perfect, all the time. In this camp, there was no room for failure. If Margot's campaign was going to succeed, she could allow for no mistakes.

Margot had rehearsed this speech hundreds of times, perfecting her intonation so she could hit just the right blend of sincerity and conviction, without being too stiff or formal. As Margot spoke, her body moved fluidly, shoulders back, hands open, and eyes shining with energy. Her media manager stood off to the side, giving subtle cues via nods of the head or hand movements. Just enough to keep Margot on track without disrupting her overall flow. Enough to ensure that the footage could be used

to its full advantage.

The speech was fairly generic--a bunch of fluffy generalities mixed with a few strategic bits of pandering that had been calculated to appeal to certain subsets of the population. All this was delivered with a gravitas that made it seem profound and monumental. The intent had been to reach as many voters as possible without alienating anyone, so the speech was vague and general enough to apply to the masses--particularly to the undecided voters. The ones who were only tangentially interested in politics and could be swayed by a compelling thirty-second sound bite on the news. The type of people who could be won over by a well-timed television commercial, for instance, because they were distracted or not interested in paying close attention to politics.

There was no point in wasting time on the extreme liberals or socialists—there was no chance they'd vote for Margot's party regardless of who represented them, especially in a presidential election, so convincing them was pointless. However, the hardline right-wingers and religious conservatives were already guaranteed to support the party's nominees. No need to focus too much time or money on wooing them excessively. Margot's resources were better spent on persuadable independents and moderates who weren't firmly entrenched in their views, and whose votes were up for grabs. It was a delicate art form. She had to dance on the fence in order to win over people's hearts and minds without offending folks so badly that they became detractors.

As Margot reached the end of her carefully prepared statement, she smiled her dazzling smile and said, "We are tremendously grateful for this opportunity to serve the American people. May God bless this country of ours, and may the American people remain free and prosperous forever. Thank you!"

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The cameras zoomed in for the perfect shot of her smiling face and Margot held that smile until the red light was shut off, to signal the end of filming. The crew began to bustle around, shifting lights and equipment and while speaking quietly among themselves. Margot rose to her feet and brushed her hands down her skirt, then pursed her lips and shot a sharp glare at the director.

“Adam, why was a shadow cast on the wall during my left turn?” she demanded, hands on her hips in a commanding posture that made the man in question freeze in his tracks, visibly nervous. “This angle was supposed to be completely lit, as I specifically requested on Friday.”

“My apologies, Mrs. Smith,” Adam murmured, rubbing his neck sheepishly. “I assure you, ma'am, the lighting was calibrated to your exact specifications. No shadows should have been visible under?—”

“Well, they were,” she pointed out icily. “And now the sun will have moved enough that we can't reshoot. Which means the perfect start to the most important video of my life is now flawed, because you and your team didn't do your jobs correctly.”

“Margot, come on,” interjected an exasperated baritone voice from behind the camera. It belonged to William, her husband and partner of almost twenty years. “I didn't even notice whatever it is you're upset about. The shot was perfect. Let's let these guys do their jobs now, all right?”

Her piercing blue eyes fixed on him with the same intensity as one would stare down an obnoxious insect. In response, the tall, slightly greying man in the expensive suit simply quirked an amused eyebrow, unmoved by her icy gaze. After the couple stared

at each other for a beat, Margot rolled her eyes dramatically and looked back at the director. She nodded reluctantly.

“Fine. We need to get this out today, so it'll have to do.” The tone of Margot’s voice made it clear what she thought of that option, but everyone in the room relaxed slightly now that she had begrudgingly consented to move on. “Send me the final cut as soon as it's complete and usable. I want to look over it myself. I need it up in time for the twelve o'clock news.”

With that, Margot turned and strode off, her heels clicking loudly in the spacious studio space as the team hurried to disassemble their setup. On her way to the door, Margot passed her husband, who trailed her with long strides. She took a deep breath to calm the anxiety flaring up inside her. Her team would be capable of producing an excellent product with limited resources and short deadlines, but she couldn't help second-guessing her performance.

She had worked for this for her whole life. Twenty years of planning and strategizing had brought her here. Every success and setback had culminated in this moment, which had been painstakingly choreographed and timed to perfection, and now her entire future hinged upon how well the speech went. It had to go off without a hitch, or else Margot might lose any chance of landing in the White House. One tiny glitch might bring it crashing down on top of her, and all her dreams and plans would collapse in a heap of ruin. Twenty years of planning and strategizing lost.

“It was perfect, Margot. Calm down,” William assured her, placing a hand on her shoulder once they exited the studio and got into the car that was waiting for them outside. She inhaled the chilled air deeply, still uncomfortable because of the humid heat outside. “You're being uptight and critical.”

She pursed her lips and averted her gaze, fidgeting with the ring on her finger as she stared out the window. He chuckled quietly at the sight, shaking his head in mild



amusement.

“What did Mr. Goldman say when you talked to him this morning?” she finally asked, after a brief silence. “We need their support, William, and we don't have a lot of time.”

“They said they're willing to discuss further,” he replied evenly. “They'll be at the fundraiser tonight. We'll do some schmoozing, toss around a few jokes and stories, and they'll get on board. It's handled, all right?”

“You said that about the conference in Maine,” she pointed out sharply, “and you didn't handle it, so?—”

“That was ten years ago, Margot,” William groaned in exasperation, rubbing his temple as though he were developing a headache. “This is as important to me as it is to you. Believe me.”

They had known each other for a long time, since childhood. They'd grown up together in a small town in Virginia, both the children of wealthy financial managers. Attended the same private school, then studied law together at Princeton. All their lives, they'd been in each other's orbits, watching each other's backs, and plotting together toward their mutual goals. It only made sense for them to get married. They worked well together and looked good together, the perfect all-American dream couple.

To the rest of the world, William and Margot Smith's relationship looked like a fairytale romance: meeting as children, marrying young, and then staying together through thick and thin. He had been by her side throughout her entire career, from her early days as a federal prosecutor to her tenure in Congress, and now, to her position as the official nominee for her party's presidential ticket. If Margot ever needed positive press, she'd trot William out for a scenic stroll through the park. Or she'd go

visit a school--or whatever else it took to make sure their machine ran smoothly.

“You were out with Tom a week ago,” she added pointedly. “This is not the time to be taking risks like that.”

“There was no risk. We're two adult men going to a football game. All anyone thinks is that you and I are regular, down-to-earth people who do wholesome things with our friends sometimes,” he replied, rolling his eyes. “Nothing compromising or controversial about it.”

“Yet you don't see me strolling about in broad daylight with any of my lady friends, now, do you?” she snapped at him. “This entire campaign depends on presenting the right image to the public. Once we're in the White House, you can move him into the East Wing and shower him with roses from the garden every night for all I care. Until then, he stays out of sight. Got it?”

“Yes, ma'am,” he mocked, offering a cheeky salute as the car pulled up in front of their hotel.

“Thank you, darling,” she cooed sarcastically, rolling her eyes and stepping out of the car.

Almost immediately, they were ushered up to their suite, where a team of stylists waited to make them over in preparation for the evening. Margot headed off to the dressing room, where her assistants were hanging up the sleek scarlet cocktail dress that she would wear that evening. It was fitted and flattering yet modest, with long sleeves and a simple scoop neckline. Bold color combined with a simple silhouette, making Margot look powerful and elegant without seeming overly flashy. It was essential for her to present a professional, polished image at all times, no matter what she was doing.

From behind the curtain, Margot heard her hairdresser chattering away as he swept her golden brown hair into a simple updo, twisting her trademark locks into an immaculately styled knot at the back of her head. Margot's makeup was natural and classy, bringing out her natural beauty without obscuring her face beneath a layer of painted features. Her beauty drew people in, but if she came across as too vain or overly concerned with appearances, it would make them think of her as vapid and unprofessional. Every single thing about Margot had been carefully crafted through years of practice and attention to detail, always skirting the balance. She had to be appealing, while remaining dignified and respectable. Margot's greatest talent was knowing exactly what image to portray in each situation, and how to adjust herself accordingly depending on her audience.

When they finally walked into the hotel lounge, Margot and William looked every bit the charismatic, well-rounded political power couple. With their matching award-winning smiles and designer clothes, they moved through the crowd with practiced ease and precision. The room was filled with industry bigwigs, political donors, lobbyists, and wealthy attendees. Margot knew exactly how to speak to each person in the room so that they would feel special.

"Oh, yes, coal mining is the backbone of American industry," she said to one industry magnate, nodding in agreement as she sipped at her champagne. "Keeping America safe and independent is the number-one priority, and ensuring our blue-collar workers continue to receive the support of the government is imperative."

The man grinned broadly and nodded enthusiastically while Margot half-listened, smiling and maintaining eye contact. He went off on a tangent about how unions were destroying the livelihood of working people. Because he was one of the wealthiest industrialists in the Midwest, it was vital to maintain a solid rapport and to reassure him that the party platform wouldn't interfere with his profit margins. Once they had shaken hands and the man had assured her that he would be making a generous donation to her campaign, Margot moved on to the next target, smiling

graciously at each person she encountered.

“Naturally,” William said to a couple of Wall Street bankers with a laugh. “It’s essential that we provide incentives to encourage investment in the American economy. It’s absurd to punish the people who’ve worked hard and invested wisely so we can provide opportunities for lazy people to benefit-- which is what the political left wants with the ludicrous tax policies they are trying to push through.”

That earned another round of handshakes and smiles, not to mention promises to donate significantly to the campaign’s coffers. As long as the money continued to roll in, they were golden. Money made the world go ‘round, and Margot knew how to attract and spend it to maximum effect. Their idealistic opponents could have the lofty promises and utopian ideals—Margot operated based on pragmatic realism. She understood the system. She knew how it worked and could get results. While Francesca Thurston was dreaming of pie in the sky and promising a brand new world, Margot was down here on the ground, building a real foundation that could pave the way for a better tomorrow.

For hours, William and Margot mingled, drank, laughed, and spoke platitudes with politicians and donors alike, all the while maintaining flawless poise. Margot made sure she held eye contact, kept a pleasant, calm smile on her lips, and avoided sounding rehearsed and robotic by adding a slight, gentle Southern drawl to her speech. Meanwhile, she watched for anyone who seemed hesitant or apprehensive, gently easing their worries with a soft smile and an earnest look from her bright blue eyes. She soothed their fears with her expert charm and friendly demeanor.

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This was easy. This was so easy. She was used to having people eat out of the palm of her hand, and despite her anxiety this morning, Margot felt perfectly at ease now that she was back in her element. A little conversation here, a few well-placed suggestions there, and people practically threw their support at her.

By the end of the evening, Margot was feeling high on the buzz of it all, absolutely on cloud nine. She had a wide smile on her lips and was laughing easily and often as she and William made their exit. Tonight had gone splendidly. They were on top of the world. Nothing was going to stop her.

3

### FRANCESCA

Francesca stepped out onto the balcony of the elegant venue, enjoying the fresh air after being inside for so long. The American Veterans Ball in D.C. was a yearly event, attended by various government officials and wealthy philanthropists in the city. It was an event where political adversaries could come together in honor of the service members who had given so much for the safety of the country. Therefore, it was one of the rare events where everyone managed to be civil.

And if you were cynical, it was easy good press. But Francesca didn't like to be cynical. At her core, she was an idealist, and had always wanted politics to be more about principles and less about appearance and popularity contests. Those core beliefs had been slowly eroded by more than a decade of serving in the Senate and seeing the harsh realities of the system. Now Francesca recognized that some degree of pragmatism and cynicism was simply an unfortunate necessity. That didn't mean she

liked it, though.

As Francesca stood outside in her floor-length, midnight blue gown, idly tracing her fingers along the smooth metal railing, her gaze fell onto the familiar silhouette of a woman who thrived while playing the game of politics- Margot Smith- the snake in the grass. She seemed to glide across the room in an elegant, modest cream gown, exchanging smiles, hugs, handshakes, and chatter with everyone she passed. An attractive mild-mannered man wearing an expensive-looking, well-tailored suit trailed dutifully behind her--a handsome accessory that complemented the whole picture.

Francesca had to physically restrain herself from rolling her eyes as she observed Margot Smith effortlessly swanning around the room, flitting between potential donors and supporters. It was no surprise to anyone that the Virginian congresswoman had been named her party's official nominee. Still, Francesca couldn't help find it just a little bit disappointing. To her, it seemed so clear that Margot's entire persona was inauthentic. Her platform centered on wooing as many people as possible, shifting with the tides to suit whatever narrative best aligned with her goals. In short, Margot represented everything Francesca detested in politics.

People ate it up, though. They saw Margot's admittedly very beautiful face and her winning smile. They heard sweet nothings about prosperity and they believed her. Not everyone, but quite possibly enough people to make the difference in a close election. The conservative base adored Margot. The rural families in red states loved her and the religious right held up Margot as the ideal representative of their values.

And in real life, here in front of Francesca for the first time, she couldn't deny that Margot Smith in that elegant cream gown was stunning. If she wasn't such a snake, she might be exactly Francesca's type.

Still. Francesca couldn't just stand and stare all night. The polite thing to do would be

to go over and say hello to her opponent. Francesca's mouth momentarily twisted into a wry grimace as she pushed away from the railing, but she composed herself and smiled brightly as she returned to the lavish ballroom. Making her way through the room, Francesca shook hands with a few guests, thanking the members of the military for their service and expressing admiration for their bravery and dedication to the country's welfare. Throughout every interaction her sincerity was clear, and the men and women in uniform responded with corresponding warmth and humility.

Eventually, Francesca made her way to where Margot stood, by one of the tall windows overlooking the courtyard. As she approached, Margot glanced her way and quirked an eyebrow, smiling like the sun.

Something about that made Francesca's skin feel warm, even in the crisp autumn chill. Nobody, no matter what they might think about Margot's political platform or general snakelike approach to life, could claim that she was anything less than strikingly beautiful. And up close, even more so. Margot's hair appeared to be spun out of silk, her pale skin was nearly flawless, but for the minimal lines showing her age. Her blue eyes were clear and luminous, and the delicate cream gown accentuated the lovely lines of her body perfectly without revealing anything beyond what was proper and tasteful.

"Senator Thurston," she proclaimed with her usual drawl, extending her hand in greeting. "What a pleasure to see you. I am so looking forward to these next few months."

Francesca shook her hand, noting that the her opponent's grip was strong, but her skin was incredibly soft. "Likewise, Congresswoman," she replied warmly. "It's an honor to be running against such a formidable candidate."

Margot laughed, creating a sound that was perfectly pitched and carried just enough music to be pleasing to the ear. Both women were all smiles as they chatted casually

about their families and the primary race. This was all for show, of course. It was good press for them both to be seen getting along and showing respect for one another. It gave the public a sense that they were working for the greater good. Unity and bipartisanship, and all those other values that immediately fell apart whenever one side of the aisle tried to push an actual piece of legislation, which affected real people.

Once a few photos had been taken and reporters had jotted down notes for later stories, Francesca and Margot politely broke apart to find their respective tables before the event officially started. There were speeches to be given, awards to be presented, and plenty of toasting to go around. Francesca took a seat next to Marcus, Juliet, and some of the other Boston bigwigs who had joined her at the table. She listened intently as the evening's host began the program with a warm introduction.

“Was that as painful as it looked?” Marcus muttered quietly, casting a glance toward Margot’s table, where she sat with her husband and team. “I’m pretty sure she wanted to shoot daggers out of her eyes at you the whole time.”

Francesca kept her face carefully neutral and pleasant, not taking her eyes off the stage. On the inside, she was stifling a laugh at her brother's colorful description. It wasn't inaccurate. Those icy blue eyes were warm and friendly at first, but sometimes, looking at Margot was like staring into the eyes of a tiger about to pounce. There was a level of barely restrained ferocity behind her--a hunger to devour anything that dared to get in her way. That same intensity permeated every aspect of the congresswoman's aura. She had clawed her way to the top by any means necessary. It would be foolish to think that Margot would suddenly have a change of heart and play nice, not when she was so close to victory.

“If only her feelings were as obvious to the voters,” Francesca whispered dryly in response.



They turned their attention to the speaker, listening to her impassioned speech about duty and sacrifice, about protecting the freedoms granted to them by the brave men and women in the military. They applauded when appropriate and raising their glasses when it was time to toast. There were more speeches during dinner, which was followed by dessert and drinks. Slowly, people began rising from their seats to mingle, socialize, dance, and network with each other. Francesca lingered at her table for a moment, sipping her wine and speaking quietly with the other people who had accompanied her. Soon, Juliet decided it was time for Francesca to stop standing on ceremony and to do the rounds.

“That's Suzannah Warren, the CEO of the Warren Media Group,” Juliet told Francesca in a low voice, pointing discreetly at a redhead speaking to someone in uniform. “Her family has been strictly conservative for generations, but there are rumors that she wants to take things in a more progressive direction now that she's in charge. Suzannah's husband was in the Navy. You met him several years ago at a fundraiser in San Diego. He passed away from a heart attack two years ago.”

“Got it,” Francesca confirmed, heading toward the two women, who smiled politely as Francesca approached.

“Ah, Senator Thurston!” Suzannah exclaimed with a wide smile. She extended her hand to shake Francesca's with a strong grip. “What an honor it is to have you here tonight. It's so good to see our leaders supporting the troops.”

“The honor is mine, Mrs. Warren,” Francesca insisted sincerely, tilting her head with an air of genuine modesty. “I wouldn't miss an opportunity to thank the people who serve to protect this nation. Your husband was a naval officer himself, wasn't he?”

“He was, yes,” the redhead confirmed. “Served this nation for twenty-two years.”

“I was fortunate enough to meet him in San Diego a few years ago. A truly

courageous and admirable man,” she responded graciously. “My deepest condolences for your loss, once again.”

“I appreciate that, Senator. Thank you,” Suzannah replied with a warm smile. “My husband is sorely missed. He would be honored to know that you remembered him.”

She turned to introduce the tall woman at her side, a stern-looking individual with long, strawberry-blonde hair tied back into a severe bun. Francesca politely thanked her for her service, and for a few minutes, they discussed her experiences in the Navy and the current economic challenges facing today’s veterans. This wasn't Francesca's core platform, but she was genuinely passionate about making sure that veterans received adequate care and resources. Her conviction came across with clarity and passion.

However, it didn't take long before Margot Smith slithered over to join the group. Of course. The Warrens had been major conservative donors for decades, so Margot had probably felt threatened when Francesca chatted with her. God forbid people interact cordially without turning it into a power struggle.

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“Suzannah, darlin', we missed you at the gala last week,” Margot said with her sugary grin, wrapping the CEO in a brief hug as though they were old friends. “I do hope your daughter is feeling better? William and I were so concerned to hear about her illness.”

It was physically difficult for Francesca to keep from rolling her eyes at the saccharine tone of the Margot's voice. It took every ounce of composure that Francesca had learned over a lifetime to appear pleasant and unconcerned.

“Oh, bless her heart, poor thing's just had the worst bout of the flu,” Suzannah lamented, shaking her head with sympathy. “It was terribly kind of you to send flowers--I really do appreciate it. She's feeling much better now, though.”

“Ah, wonderful. I'm so glad to hear it,” Margot replied, patting Suzannah's arm with seemingly sincere relief.

No, really, how did people fall for this? Francesca thought to herself. Margot was charming and personable, and the accent certainly helped make her seem approachable, but her words sounded so phony to Francesca's ears. She did her best to stay friendly, though, continuing her conversation with the naval officer while Margot chatted with Suzannah about their families and personal lives.

At one point, Francesca felt her gaze slip to the lay of the cream silk gown over Margot Smith's ass.

Francesca! She scolded herself. Do not fall for the snake's basic charms!

Francesca pulled herself together. She was a feminist. She was a senator and presidential candidate. She was way above stealing glances at her rival's ass--however fine it may be.

Eventually, Suzannah and her companion excused themselves to find the restroom, leaving the two candidates alone. As soon as they were out of earshot, Margot rounded on Francesca with a deadly smile, holding her champagne glass aloft as she leaned against the wall and studied Francesca through narrowed eyes. By now, the press had been sent home to let the attendees enjoy the evening in relative peace. Their secluded corner was out of the way of traffic, which meant that it was far less crowded and private enough to allow for more honest conversation.

“Are you really this afraid of losing a single potential donor, Margot?” Francesca asked with a sigh, arching her eyebrows. “That was blatantly transparent, even for you. I thought you had more class than that.”

“I'm being transparent?” Margot retorted with a breathless snort, rolling her sky-blue eyes far enough back that she could probably see the back of her skull. “I take it you just decided to go court the Warrens out of the kindness of your heart, then?”

“I was speaking with a veteran, Congresswoman,” Francesca pointed out calmly, knowing damn well she also had a motive.

“You were speaking with Suzannah Warren, trying to convince her you care about veterans--despite your party's history of cutting their funding in favor of whatever fad initiative is popular with the masses,” Margot shot back, taking a sip of her champagne.

“We have been trying to pass more inclusive healthcare and housing reforms for everyone, including veterans,” Francesca reminded her pointedly, “whereas all you do is scream loudly about the military and the VA because it sounds good, without

actually putting forward any meaningful plans to improve their situations. And now you're upset because people like Warren are finally realizing that all you offer are empty promises.”

Margot scoffed in disbelief. “You're accusing me of using veterans as a political stunt?” she hissed. “My grandfather was?—”

“Yes, yes, I know, you can't get through a single interview without mentioning him,” Francesca sighed in exasperation.

“Oh, and you're so much better. Like you're not trotting out the great Frank Thurston every chance you get,” Margot retorted, with a venomous glare. “Every time you want to look good, you talk about your grandfather's legacy and pretend you're the heir to the throne. I'm not judging, darlin'. Anyone would take advantage of a connection like that. But don't act like you're too good to play the same game the rest of us are playing.”

God, this woman was infuriating. Margot could spit pure bile while wearing a honey-sweet smile, poison rolling off her tongue like it was sugar. That slightly breathy, velvety voice stayed smooth and calm, even as she hurled accusations and insults like arrows. Her cerulean eyes glittered with indignation, but her body language was languid and relaxed, one hand gracefully twirling her champagne glass and the other resting lightly on the wall beside her. Margot was untouchable. Unflappable. An invincible ice queen who liked to watch the world burn beneath her feet. It was impossibly, infuriatingly, maddeningly, and utterly irresistible to behold.

Francesca felt her stomach flip with an odd mixture of rage and desire.

I want her.

Fuck.

She clenched her teeth as she forced herself to swallow both emotions with cool logic. She took a deep breath. No, she knew better than to stoop to this level of catty rivalry. And she certainly knew better than to imagine all the ways she wanted to shut those soft, full lips up.

“You must excuse me, Congresswoman, but I don't have time to waste on petty arguments or pointless name-calling,” Francesca said in a firm, but polite tone, her politician's mask effortlessly slipping back into place. “I hope the rest of this election will be civil and professional in word and deed. You're a brilliant politician and I respect you tremendously. I would hate for this to dissolve into a childish spat. Goodnight, Mrs. Smith.”

With a slight nod, she moved past Margot toward the crowd once more, leaving the snake leaning against the wall with a bemused smirk. Francesca's cheeks were faintly flushed. She felt lightheaded and more than a little dazed.

Oh, dear. If this kept up, it was going to be a very long and distracting few months. Francesca couldn't let herself get distracted now. There was too much at stake for her to falter, and she would need every ounce of focus to keep it together until the campaign came to an end. There were bigger things to worry about than how ridiculously attractive her rival happened to be.

But good God, the woman was stunning.

4

## MARGOT

Margot was a planner. Every moment of her life was meticulously accounted for--her time calculated with the sole objective of achieving her goals. This was doubly true now that Margot had achieved a milestone most politicians could only dream of. She

had been named as her party's presidential candidate! Since then, Margot's days had become a flurry of strategy meetings, media appearances, and flights to different cities. Not to mention fundraisers, donor gatherings, interviews, and various other functions, all with the purpose of ensuring her victory in November.

Additionally, Margot kept meticulous track of everything her opponents said and did--watching every speech and interview to pinpoint possible weaknesses. That was what engaged her on this late summer morning. With her lips pursed and legs crossed, she sat in the conference room of their campaign headquarters in Arlington, scrutinizing Francesca Thurston's recent appearance on a late-night talk show.

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The senator was answering questions about her education policies in one of her usual charming, charismatic performances. She exuded the perfect balance of intelligence, confidence, and dignity. Her warm brown eyes twinkled with humor, crinkling at the edges as her mouth quirked into a faint smile. It all seemed effortless. Like the woman just showed up to these things without any prep, said whatever popped into her head, and somehow it was always exactly the right thing. It always sounded passionate, well-reasoned, and convincing. She was maddening.

“Well,” said Charlotte, the senior political strategist sitting beside Margot, “the senator managed to dodge the question about her stance on small-business regulations. She doesn't want to admit that their platform would hurt independent workers. We should press her on that during the debate.”

Margot nodded thoughtfully, tapping her nails against the edge of the mahogany table. Her staff scrolled through their notes and laptops, brows furrowed as they looked for anything else to pick apart. The cameras caught a brief glimpse of Francesca glancing down and adjusting her microphone. Margot's gaze tracked the movement, noticing her steady hands and long fingers. Those hands looked strong and capable, yet elegant--perfectly suited to handle whatever life threw at her, even if she might break a nail in the process. Hands that were trained to hold authority with a firm grip, yet she could touch gently enough to win over hearts.

“Mrs. Smith, what do you think?” asked Michael, the chief communications advisor. “Do you think she'll try and use her family name to distract from her policy failures again?”

Margot blinked rapidly and snapped back to attention, straightening in her seat with a



sudden intake of breath. Why in the world was she wasting time thinking about Francesca Thurston's hands? She cleared her throat, embarrassed, tossing her hair behind her shoulder. Ever since the military ball, Margot had found herself feeling oddly antsy when her thoughts drifted to her opponent. There was something about that smooth caramel skin in that navy blue gown, and the conviction in those dark brown eyes?—

Jesus. Get it together, woman.

This was entirely unacceptable. These strange and completely irrational reactions were throwing her off her stride.

“She usually does,” Margot finally replied after a moment, mentally willing her cheeks not to flush. “Her only real strength is name recognition, because of her family's legacy. Beyond some fancy talking points about gay rights and feminism, it's all the same vaguely uplifting mush with no actionable steps. So, yeah, she'll pivot to some nonsense about building bridges and making America prosperous with diversity just like her grandfather did.”

That earned her a chuckle from the people sitting around the table. They nodded in agreement, jotting down notes. In the corner, William took a sip of his coffee, momentarily distracted by something on his phone. Probably Tom again. Margot generally had no problem with her husband's paramour—they had agreed when they got married that it was all for show. They had both pursued other relationships during the ensuing decades—but this one had become increasingly obnoxious lately.

Or maybe it was just because Margot had been too busy the last few years to have any fun herself, which left her feeling irritated and restless. It wasn't something she could risk these days. Tom had been in their orbit for long enough that the media didn't blink an eye, but if she started prancing around town with some pretty girl on her arm, it'd attract scrutiny. People might start asking questions. They wouldn't jump

straight to 'lesbian', but they'd get there eventually. Even the slightest whiff of suspicion was enough to bring everything crashing down on top of her. If Margot couldn't maintain her image as a model of traditional virtue, then she'd be done for.

So she'd buried that part of her years ago and she had no regrets about it. But right now, Francesca Thurston was on the screen talking about how liberating it was to be able to be herself, to live her authentic truth, and not have that truth overshadow her political accomplishments. Some crap about progress and equality. It made Margot want to stab the pen she was currently writing with through the television screen and directly into Francesca's chest.

That wasn't fair. It wasn't. She'd had to compromise and suppress everything about herself to get where she was, but Francesca and her army of bleeding-heart progressives got to strut around with their rainbow flags and openly admit to sleeping with women, and they still got elected. If not for the Thurston family's esteemed legacy, Francesca would have been booted out of politics before she even set foot on the Senate floor. Any other openly queer woman would never even be able to dream of becoming president. They all had to hide and play it safe. To lie and get married, just to keep up appearances.

The pen snapped in half in Margot's hands. Its sharp crack cut through the quiet murmur of conversation, and all heads around the table swiveled toward her. For a moment, all she did was stare at the ink trickling down her fingers--a thin blue line staining the white starched fabric of her sleeve. Then an assistant broke the silence, rushing to clean up the mess and fetch towels and a fresh pen. Margot simply rolled up her sleeves and shook the worst of the damage off, taking a deep breath.

"This woman drives me insane," she said with a sheepish shrug, shaking her head as she wiped the smudges from her hand. "So how do we play this? What angles do we work, and whom do we target first?"

They spent the better part of the next hour strategizing and debating possible lines of attack in the upcoming debate. The obvious solution was to go on the offensive. Francesca Thurston was all smiles and pretty words, but with no substance. They needed to highlight that. Call out every policy decision, every broken promise and change of heart, every contradictory statement Francesca had ever made. Show that she was indecisive, inconsistent, and unfit for high office. That she was driven solely by personal preference and emotion--rather than by concrete plans for growth and change.

“There's got to be some kind of stain on that wholesome image of hers,” Margot commented with a sigh. “She can't be as clean as she pretends to be. Nobody is. What've we got?”

“Nothing right now, ma'am,” Charlotte replied, glancing through the notes on her laptop. “Not even a drunk photo from college. This lady really is squeaky clean.”

“That's ridiculous,” Margot said coolly. “There's something out there and I need to know what it is. Find it.”

The staffers immediately went to work, combing through files and records of every single statement and public appearance Francesca Thurston ever made. Satisfied, Margot rose to her feet and brushed herself off, signaling to William that it was time to move along. He nodded and stood, gathering up his things and following her out into the hallway. They passed through the lobby, giving a few perfunctory waves and nods as they passed campaign workers in cubicles, heading out to where the car waited for them.

Once there, William checked his phone again. Margot rolled her eyes theatrically, leaning back against the leather seat and crossing her arms.

“Really, Will? You're a grown man. You can go five minutes without texting your

boyfriend,” she drawled, with a touch of bitterness.

He looked up at her and there was something in his eyes that hadn't been there a minute ago, before he'd gotten on that phone. His brows furrowed with just a hint in concern, a little crease forming between them. He didn't say anything at first, just studied her for a few moments with a frown. She arched her eyebrows expectantly, waiting for him to respond. The driver was already pulling onto the road, steering them toward the airport.

“My boyfriend isn't the problem right now, Margie,” he answered slowly, handing her the cellphone with a concerned frown. “Have a read.”

Confused, she took the device and gave him a questioning glance. He simply shrugged, tucking his arms across his chest and nodding once again toward the screen. She tilted her head and glanced at the email in front of her, and her breath caught in her throat. With cold, clammy fingers, Margot clicked the attachment below the message and a grainy, pixelated photo filled the display. Her face, much younger than it was now, gazed back at her, her body draped over another woman in a state of undress. Her lips were pressed to the other woman's collarbone, her hands entangled in silky black hair.

“Who the hell sent this?” Margot growled furiously. She tried to keep her hands from trembling as she scrolled back up to read the message once again. It contained no identifying information or indication of the sender, only a single short phrase: 'Remember me?'

“It's a throwaway email,” he replied, “but I assume the culprit is whomever this woman is, right?”

He had the audacity to sound sardonic. She glared at him, eyes narrowing dangerously. “William.”

He raised his hands, chuckling bitterly under his breath. “What do you want me to say? I don't know anything more than you do,” he replied defensively, shaking his head. “Who is that girl, anyway? Doesn't look like any of the ones I remember you going around with.”

Margot exhaled sharply, rubbing her temples irritably. “God, I don't know,” she muttered in frustration, raking her fingers through her hair. “Probably some drunk hookup back in college. I thought we'd already paid off everyone who might give us trouble.”

“Well, guess not,” her husband replied drily, earning him another sharp look. “It's fine, Margot. We'll just cut her a check, have her sign an NDA, and it'll go away. Just like we always do. Nothing we haven't done a hundred times before.”

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She hesitated, staring down at the photo, studying it pensively. This was exactly the kind of thing Francesca bloody Thurston didn't have to worry about. Nobody would care if some old girlfriend or one-night stand spilled embarrassing details of a drunken escapade. Sure, it might get some headlines for a week or so, but at the end of the day, it would be dismissed as a cute, if slightly embarrassing, anecdote from her wild youth. But for Margot, such a story would tank her career within hours.

Except, maybe it wouldn't. She took a deep breath to steady herself, then narrowed her eyes, distancing herself from the situation and looking objectively at the photo in front of her. It was a grainy scan of a blurry polaroid from twenty years ago. Her face was at an angle, making it almost impossible to recognize the individual features. Sure, it looked like her—it was her—but in that way where it also sort of looked like any other slender, mid-twenties blonde with conventionally attractive features.

Nobody would believe that Margot Smith, Virginia congresswoman, straight conservative Republican, former lawyer, congresswoman, and happily married paragon of traditional family values would sleep with a woman. Not unless she admitted to it. And why in the world would she do that?

She smiled to herself, shaking her head and handing the phone back to William.

“This is nothing,” she decided confidently, settling back in her chair and crossing her legs. “She has no proof of anything. The photo's practically useless.”

William raised a skeptical eyebrow at her, pursing his lips thoughtfully. “You freak out about me being so much as seen within a ten-yard radius of Tom at a public football game, but a photo of you half-naked with your mouth on a woman's neck is

'nothing'?" he retorted sarcastically.

"Yes," she answered with a casual shrug. "The liberal media will go wild about it, I'm sure, but you can't make anything out in this picture except two girls, one of whom might slightly resemble me, messing around in a dimly lit room. Nobody important to our campaign is going to take that seriously. Honestly, it might be good for us."

"Really?" William retorted incredulously with a snort. "I don't see how."

"Of course you don't, darlin'," the blonde replied sweetly. "We will deny it's me, obviously. You and I have been together since college, madly in love and blah blah whatever, so of course I wasn't fooling around with anyone else. This is clearly an attempt by Thurston's campaign to damage my reputation with fake news and slander. That'll win us sympathy points and prove that she's resorting to lies and dirty tricks to win."

She grinned triumphantly to herself, pleased with her own machinations. William gave a huff of laughter and leaned his head against the window, shaking his head.

"All right, Margie," he agreed with a teasing grin. "Your call. But aren't you worried at all that there might be more of these photos hiding somewhere?"

A tense moment of silence passed. She bit her lip as her mind raced through scenarios and possible responses.

"Whoever sent this didn't give us any way to contact them," she responded warily, "so if they want money, they'll have reach out again before taking anything to the press. For now, it just looks like an attempt to scare us into doing something stupid. Ignoring it is the safest option, unless we hear differently."

Margot rested her elbow against the door and stared out the car window at the skyline

drifting by as they made their way to the airport, her chin resting on her knuckles. It was a beautiful day, bright blue and clear with hardly a cloud in the sky. On the inside, however, despite her confident words, Margot's mind whirled like a dark hurricane, trying to piece together those long-ago events and to figure out exactly whom this might be, and whether she had any reason to be scared.

“Let's schedule a stop at the arboretum in Baltimore before the rally,” Margot declared, leafing through her planner with a thoughtful frown. “Get some nice pictures of the two of us feeding the ducks, holding hands, all of that. Just in case.”

She shot her husband a pointed look. He understood what she meant. In case the scandal started to gain traction, Margot wanted to show that they were still the perfect, devoted couple with a loving relationship to prove it. He nodded, pulling out his phone again.

“All right. I'll make some calls and get it set up,” he affirmed with a grin.

If nothing else, Margot thought to herself, he was a good business partner. They had always worked well together when it counted. Theirs was an alliance rooted in mutual understanding and ambition, not in romantic affection, and it had worked. This was the life she had chosen for herself. Becoming the leader of the free world was worth sacrificing fleeting, frivolous pleasure. Margot wasn't going to let her life's dream be ruined by personal feelings.

So she pushed aside the strange, unpleasant knot that formed in her chest whenever she thought about her carefree youth, before she had locked it all away to focus on her goals. She dismissed the strange, envious thoughts she'd been having about Francesca, and wondering how it would feel to do the same.

Margot didn't have time to spare pondering trivial, insignificant matters. She was on her way to the White House. Anything else was immaterial.



## FRANCESCA

The first official debate was going to be held in Chicago, in front of millions of TV viewers and thousands gathered live in the auditorium. Shortly before she was due to go on stage, Francesca stood in the dressing room with her team, doing a last-second rehearsal of talking points. Juliet was reviewing the cards on her laptop, going over statistics and figures, while the styling team was frantically fixing Francesca's hair and makeup.

The senator was seated at the vanity, listening intently as the campaign staff rattled off questions, issues, and topics that might come up onstage. Mostly, she remained silent and listened, intently focused on memorizing and internalizing the data being hurled at her. This was the first real opportunity for the candidates to come into direct confrontation with each other. Every statement, every facial expression, every subtle nuance of word choice during this debate would be dissected and picked apart by pundits and political analysts for weeks to come. One false move or misstatement could haunt Francesca for the rest of the campaign.

Margot Smith was formidable. There was no other word for it. Francesca admired the woman's iron will and ruthlessness, but God help anybody who stood in her way. Margot would do whatever it took to win, without so much as blinking an eye. Tonight, Francesca was anticipating an all-out assault. So far, she had managed to hold her own during the press interviews, and the polls were showing a slight advantage for her campaign, but all of that could change in a heartbeat. Just a few well-aimed arrows would be enough to fatally wound her candidacy. All Francesca could do was hold fast and strike back as best she could, without compromising her own integrity.

As soon as she heard the introduction music begin, signaling that it was almost time

to take their places onstage, Francesca gave the stylist a polite nod of thanks and slipped on her suit jacket. Accompanied by Marcus and Juliet, she strode into the main hall, her shoulders squared and her head held high.

Margot stood on the opposite end of the stage, talking quietly with her husband and team, looking impossibly flawless in a perfectly fitted dove-gray pantsuit. Her hair was pinned into a tasteful twist, showing off her high cheekbones and elegant jawline. Her pale pink lips curled into a wide smile as Francesca met her eyes. The two women approached each other like circling lionesses, waiting for the perfect moment to pounce.

They stopped a few feet apart, momentarily holding each other's gaze. Francesca nodded in greeting and extended a hand. Margot mirrored the gesture. As their hands clasped, a surge of energy pulsed through the space between them. A bolt of electricity rippled up Francesca's spine at the touch of Margot's soft, cool hand. It felt like her whole body had been shocked, her skin tingling from the contact. Margot blinked and inhaled sharply. It seemed the sensation was mutual.

It was probably just the intensity of the moment, Francesca reasoned. They were on the global stage. The next ninety minutes could very well determine the outcome of this election. Both of their futures were riding on how this played out. Everything they had spent their lives working toward was at stake. They were both expert politicians who had spent close to two decades at the highest level of U.S. politics, so neither usually got nervous. But this was different.

“Good luck, Senator Thurston,” Margot said with a gracious smile, her piercing blue eyes sparkling with thinly-veiled amusement. “May the best woman win.”

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“Likewise, Congresswoman,” replied Francesca with a confident grin. “I look forward to an engaging discussion.”

Then, they released each other's hands and turned to head in opposite directions. Each took her place at a podium. The moderator, a renowned journalist known for her impartiality, sat between the candidates with a calm demeanor, a stack of notes in front of her. In front of the stage, thousands of audience members were packed into the seats, buzzing with anticipation. The press section was filled to the brim, representing every major media outlet. Broadcasting to households across the country and around the globe. Cameras were positioned in several spots to ensure that coverage would be as complete and accurate as possible, capturing the scene from every angle.

The lights were bright. Francesca could barely make out the faces of the people in the crowd. She glanced sideways at Margot, who was smiling graciously at the cameras. She looked perfectly poised, her posture impeccable and her demeanor warm and welcoming. There was no trace of the cool, calculating ice queen that lurked beneath the surface, the Machiavellian strategist who would walk over bodies to get what she wanted. Instead, she appeared to be the caring, wise, trustworthy stateswoman that her campaign portrayed her to be. It was like watching a magician pull a rabbit out of a hat.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for joining us for the first official presidential debate of this election season,” the moderator announced, her voice echoing in the large chamber. “This evening's format will be a series of opening statements, followed by a moderated question-and-answer session. Then we will conclude with closing remarks.”

Francesca focused on her breathing while the rules and procedures were outlined. Her pulse was racing, adrenaline coursing through her veins. It wasn't anxiety. It was exhilaration. Her body was primed and ready to perform, every muscle tight and alert, ready to spring into action and fight. A familiar excitement bubbled up inside her. The thrill of a good match. The joy of competing at the top of her field, while embracing the fire of rivalry ignited by a worthy opponent. Francesca's blood was thrumming with anticipation and she relished the feeling, embracing it and letting it fuel her.

The moderator introduced the candidates, reading their titles and bios for the benefit of the viewers at home. She introduced the main topics of the debate—healthcare reform, education, and economic development—and invited Francesca to deliver her opening statement.

The stage lighting shifted, illuminating Francesca in a warm, friendly glow. When she began to speak, her voice was firm and clear, ringing through the hall with a natural strength and passion that could not be faked. She didn't have to pretend to be confident and she didn't have to force herself to project authority. It came naturally to her.

“Thank you, Ms. Johnson, and thank you, Illinois, for the honor of hosting this historic debate,” she began, inclining her head politely to the audience. “Right now, our country is at a crossroads. Throughout the nation, the cost of living continues to rise, while the average American family struggles to keep up with the pace of change. Many of our people are suffering under the weight of crippling student debt, record-high housing costs, and unconscionable healthcare premiums. I look at the young people of today and I see a generation of tremendous potential and extraordinary talent that deserves to be nurtured and cultivated, so that they may lead America into a brighter future. Our children deserve to have access to quality education, affordable healthcare, and job security. That is the foundation for a prosperous and united nation.”

Her gaze swept over the crowd, making eye contact with as many people as possible, holding her audience in rapt attention. Margot was listening with her hands folded in front of her, her attention fixed on Francesca with a neutral, contemplative expression.

“But beyond the problems facing our people, there is a more fundamental issue that we must address as a nation, and that is the corrosion of our core principles,” Francesca continued passionately, her eyes blazing with conviction. “We are a nation founded on the belief that all people are created equal and therefore have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The whole world looks to us as a shining beacon of hope and freedom, and we must uphold and honor that legacy. For fifteen years, I have fought for justice, equality, and fairness on Capitol Hill. In my home state of Massachusetts, we have implemented firm workplace protections against discrimination for people of all walks of life, and the unemployment rate has gone down by twelve percent in the past decade. We need to expand those programs and implement similar laws throughout the United States, in order to guarantee that every citizen has the genuine opportunity to pursue the life he or she wants to live.”

Francesca’s voice rang out through the hall and power flowed through her with a magnetic intensity that compelled attention. In a matter of moments, she had taken full control of the room, drawing everyone’s eyes to her. Francesca delivered her arguments with eloquence and poise, playing the crowd like a maestra directing an orchestra. She was in her element here, and she thrived on the energy that swelled around her. Francesca continued to rattle off talking points from memory, articulating her visions for a more just, compassionate country with fire in her eyes and steel in her words. By the time Francesca’s three minutes were up, she had the room eating out of her hand.

Then it was Margot’s turn to speak. The spotlight pivoted to the beautiful woman who nodded politely at Francesca before beginning her own speech. She wore an enigmatic little smile, her lips pursed in a mysterious, sly grin that tugged at the

corners of her mouth. Her eyes shone brightly beneath the harsh glare of the lights and she glanced across the room, taking in the crowd.

“My dear friends, I'm incredibly grateful to be standing here tonight, debating these vital issues with Senator Thurston,” Margot drawled charmingly, flashing a brilliant grin at her opponent. “My opponent is a remarkable woman with an outstanding record of accomplishment. However, I and millions of Americans question the wisdom of her plans to increase taxes, expand irresponsible programs, and invest billions in unnecessary, wasteful government spending. Will the policies Senator Thurston advocates for truly benefit ordinary, honest, hard-working Americans? No. Business owners throughout our nation will suffer under these tax increases, which will prevent them from growing and creating new jobs. The left likes to talk about social welfare, but their programs disincentivize self-reliance and instill dependency on the government to take care of people, stifling innovation and growth.”

So far, Francesca noted drily to herself, Margot hadn't said a single word about her own platform. It was a full-out offense with no attempt to defend or even mention her own political positions. Instead, Margot opted to demonize Francesca's agenda, playing off fear and insecurity rather than presenting alternatives of her own. No surprises there. Sometimes, Francesca wondered if Margot genuinely believed in anything she was saying, or rather, if she'd just learned to master the art of riling an angry mob.

“I fully support the government providing the American people with access to high-quality, affordable healthcare,” Margot continued, “but our current system has led to massive federal debt, and our seniors and disabled citizens cannot afford the skyrocketing premium prices year after year. Healthcare may have become more affordable for the wealthy elite, but what about for blue-collar families, rural communities, and struggling small-business owners, who lack access to adequate health insurance? They're being crushed by the astronomical costs that are crippling our economy and driving the American Dream out of reach for the average

household. Senator Thurston comes from a wealthy liberal bubble, and her platform makes it clear that this is her priority. My friends and family in the South struggle to get by every day, and their wages are stagnating. We need to create opportunities by supporting American businesses, rather than punishing them for generating wealth.”

She went on in that same manner, painting Francesca as incompetent, out of touch, and uninterested in helping the working class. It was pure fiction, not to mention that it was also wildly hypocritical--coming from the dictionary definition of an entitled rich white woman whose family was made up of multi-millionaires who had made their wealth by exploiting laborers. Even now, Margot stood there in her thousand-dollar designer suit, speaking with the utmost confidence about financial insecurity for everyday Americans. Rage sold better than rationality, and hatred brought in ratings. Classic.

The rest of the debate continued in a similar fashion. Francesca presented compelling, powerful messages of hope and unity, while Margot poked holes in her opponent's logic and used cheap theatrics to appeal to emotion. For every passionate quote that invoked tears, cheers, or applause, there was a sound bite that fired up anger and resentment. As infuriating as this was, it was also strangely intoxicating. The two women danced back and forth, volleying questions and answers at each other, exchanging verbal blows and parrying ripostes with effortless, well-practiced ease.

Margot's ice-blue eyes shone with fierce determination, reflecting the intensity of her competitor's stare. Francesca could feel her pulse racing as they sparred, the rhythm of her heart kicking up to match the rush of adrenaline flooding through her every time they locked eyes. It was electrifying. Neither woman gave ground, striking blow for blow with such precision and force that the air itself seemed to crackle and pop around them, an invisible aura of tension emanating from the stage and enveloping the audience until every pair of eyes locked onto them with rapt, spellbound awe.

At the end of ninety minutes, the moderator called time, officially concluding the

debate. They each gave their closing statements, adding parting remarks aimed directly at the viewers at home. Then they thanked each other and the viewers for joining in. The lights went down, signaling the end of the debate, and Margot flashed Francesca that insufferably sexy smirk of hers as they left the stage. She exuded a mixture of exhaustion and satisfaction at a challenging duel well-fought. Francesca smirked right back, silently fuming at her rival's arrogance, even as her heart did a strange little flutter at the sight of her smile.

When the curtains closed behind them, Francesca breathed a sigh of relief. Her team escorted her to the waiting car, chattering about online reactions and impressions, but she was too exhausted to pay much attention to their reports. This would have to wait until tomorrow, when she had come down from the adrenaline high and the whirlwind in her brain had calmed enough for her to form coherent thoughts. Right now, all Francesca wanted was to go back to the hotel, have a quiet drink, and sink into bed.

She walked into the hotel lounge half an hour later, glad for the chance to kick back and relax. After the rush of the debate, her body was starting to feel stiff and sore. A glass of wine would help ease the tension in her muscles. Francesca didn't feel quite ready to crash just yet, though, and the hotel bar offered a comfortable, cozy atmosphere--dimly lit and warm with soft jazz playing in the background.

A drink sounded like the perfect way to unwind before hitting the sack. Her security detail ensured that she would be given a private booth in the corner of the room, which meant Francesca would have some peace and quiet to herself while she sipped her merlot and let the stress of the day fade. Glass in hand, she leaned back against the plush leather seat and stared up at the ceiling, feeling the knot in her back loosen as the warmth spread through her limbs.

This felt wonderful. Just a bit of space to decompress without having to worry about cameras or press. The soft, buttery light of the lamps cast a warm, golden glow across



her skin and a cool breeze drifted in from the patio outside. The murmur of conversation throughout the room buzzed softly in her ears. Francesca was pleased with her performance on stage and hoped people would see that her ideas were grounded in reality, unlike those of her opponent, who simply floated through the world saying whatever people wanted to hear and never justified nor explained herself. How could you debate with somebody like that?

As Francesca opened her eyes, a flash of gold in her peripheral vision caught her attention. In the middle of the room, sitting at a table with her husband, was the devil herself--still wearing the same expensive designer suit she had worn onstage. Only now, her jacket had been discarded, lying haphazardly on the armrest of her chair, revealing the white silk blouse underneath. Francesca could see the outline of her breasts through the fine material. Her sleeves were rolled up to mid-arm and her perfectly manicured hands rested casually on the tabletop.

For a moment, Francesca found herself just watching, mesmerized by the easy, graceful elegance Margot possessed. But even with her husband, there was a kind of icy remove to her presence. Margot always seemed to be holding herself at a distance, as if she feared giving anyone the slightest glimpse inside her mind.

They seemed to like each other well enough—they were smiling and laughing together—but Francesca suspected there was no real love there. Only camaraderie and loyalty borne out of necessity, a silent understanding that they both benefitted from each other. They knew how to play the part of a happy, loving couple perfectly, but it was an act, nothing more. She wondered for a second if Margot really let anyone truly close to her. It seemed terribly lonely to live that way.

Just as she was thinking this, William leaned forward and kissed Margot on the cheek, then got up from the table and walked toward the elevator. When he left, Margot glanced around, and the two women met each other's gaze. A brief, wordless exchange passed between them. Their eyes lingered on one another for a moment

longer than necessary and a strange warmth rose on the back of Francesca's neck. There was something about the way Margot watched her, a certain intensity and curiosity that caught her off guard.

Margot plastered on her usual dazzling smile, then rose to her feet and elegantly strode over to the booth where Francesca sat.

“Good evening, Francesca. Imagine running into you here,” she said breezily in that drawling Southern twang, sinking gracefully onto the chair across from her with a wide grin. “That was certainly quite a show, wasn't it? You were on fire tonight.”

“You might say that,” Francesca replied with an amused grin of her own, shaking her head at the woman's audacity. “I don't think I've ever met anybody as full of shit as you.”

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Margot laughed at that, tilting her head back. Her hair was beginning to fall loose from the knot at the top of her head, freeing a few delicate, shimmering golden curls. Her pink lips curled into that charming little smirk and her eyes glittered with mischief. To Margot, it was all a show—a game with high stakes, sure, but still a game. The whole world was one grand stage and spectacle to her. Margot had spent almost two hours viciously attacking Francesca's character on the world stage, yet now that they were alone, she acted like they were the best of friends.

“Nothing personal,” Margot crooned sweetly with a flutter of her eyelashes. “It's just politics. You know how it is.”

“I do,” Francesca replied, “but some of us actually care about the issues, Margot. Have you ever considered focusing on substantive policy goals instead of pandering?”

Margot took a sip of her drink with a nonchalant shrug. “I have,” she replied lightly, “but that isn't nearly as effective. I'm giving the people what they want, darlin'. That's democracy in action, isn't it?”

Francesca chuckled wryly, rolling her eyes as she took another sip of her wine. “You know, I actually believe in the things I'm fighting for,” she pointed out. “You just seem to enjoy the chaos. As long as it helps your polls, right? As far as you're concerned, anything goes.”

Margot arched a well-groomed eyebrow tilting her head inquisitively. “Don't get all high-and-mighty with me, Senator,” she retorted icily. “You didn't get where you are today without trampling over a few innocent souls yourself. This is the real world, not

the Model U.N. None of us are clean.”

“Is that what you tell yourself so you can sleep at night?” Francesca shot back, folding her arms across her chest. “You act like you're untouchable, but deep down, you must feel it gnawing at you. The weight of all those decisions, all that blood on your hands. It takes its toll over time.”

Margot smirked bitterly, leaning back in her seat and crossing her long legs with elegant precision. “Of course I do,” she answered with a sigh, “but I do what needs to be done. I don't regret anything, and I won't apologize for it. There are sacrifices that need to be made for the greater good, and neither of us is too righteous and pure to recognize that. At least I have the self-awareness to acknowledge it. You try to paint yourself as this noble crusader for justice, but nobody gets to where we are without getting their hands dirty. If you're struggling to sleep at night, I suggest coming to terms with who you are. It's good for the soul.”

“So is kindness,” Francesca challenged with narrowed eyes, “and empathy. Maybe you should give them a try sometime. See how you like it.”

“I'll worry about that when I'm retired,” she deadpanned, winking slyly at Francesca. “For now, I have a country to run. Good luck beating me with your fancy words and lofty ideals. It's cute.”

She put her delicate hand on top of Francesca's on the table and Francesca felt a bolt of electricity between them. She pulled her hand sharply away.

“Charming,” Francesca returned drily, draining the last of her glass with a grin. “Good talk, Congresswoman. I admire your commitment to consistency. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a campaign to win.”

With that, she stood, straightening her shirt and smoothing her trousers. Margot let

out a brilliant, sparkling laugh that made Francesca's insides twist in the strangest way. She got to her feet as well, shooting Francesca a crooked smirk. For a moment, Margot looked younger and freer somehow, as if this interaction had allowed her to drop a mask for just a moment and reveal herself. It was a captivating expression. Margot looked stunning in the dim amber lighting of the lounge, her fair skin illuminated by the candlelight like some old portrait of a Greek goddess come to life. Her hair shone with a fiery golden glow, her porcelain face lit up, as those piercing blue eyes gazed deeply into Francesca's with a strange kind of hunger.

“Well then, shall we?” Margot said.

They fell into step as they headed toward the elevators, neither speaking. They simply walked together in silence, shoulder to shoulder, matching each other stride for stride. The elevator arrived, and they stepped inside, selecting their respective floors and facing forward as the elevator rocketed upwards. For a moment, the space seemed to shrink around them, and there was barely enough room to breathe. Their eyes met like they were sizing each other up, two predators assessing one another in anticipation of a fight. There was something primal and electric in the air between them--the charge of two competing forces colliding.

Suddenly, there was a whirring noise and a sickening jolt. The elevator shuddered and ground to a halt. The lights blinked and flickered, then cut out entirely, leaving only the red emergency lights to illuminate their faces. The women exhaled in tandem, two pairs of eyes darting around in confusion. Both of them turned their heads, scanning the walls for any kind of clue as to what might have happened. Around them was only a dull, hollow silence.

After a beat, they glanced at each other, silently confirming the obvious. Yes. This was bad.

## MARGOT

Of course, this had to happen tonight. A broken elevator was exactly what was missing from this already stellar situation. It had been a long, exhausting day preceded by long, exhausting weeks of preparation and travel leading up to the debate. The event itself had taken every ounce of energy in Margot's reserves to push through. Then she'd had to spend an hour pretending to care about William's golf game over dinner, so that the hotel staff could get a nice little story to tell about how loving and devoted they were. And now, as the cherry on top of the cake, fate had seen fit to deliver her and her opponent a power outage.

Over the speaker, the hotel manager spoke hurriedly and apologetically, telling them that they should be back online in twenty minutes. He sounded utterly distraught about the whole thing and blamed it on construction work having damaged the electrical wires feeding into the building. Meanwhile, Francesca was on the phone with her security team, who were demanding that they be allowed to evacuate the women immediately.

This was a matter of national security—both presidential candidates, a congresswoman and a senator, trapped alone together in an elevator. The conspiracy theories wrote themselves. The media was probably all over this already, covering the story with intense zeal and fervor, fueling all sorts of wild speculation about foul play and assassination plots. It was a ridiculous notion, of course. There was no danger, just a wildly inconvenient technical problem caused by somebody's negligence.

Honestly, that was far more irritating. If Margot was going to be inconvenienced like this, she would much prefer it be because someone tried to kill her rather than because city workers couldn't be bothered to double-check their work. There was nothing that infuriated Margot more than incompetence.

“Let the mechanics handle this one, George,” Francesca spoke sternly into her phone.

“Stay alert and have a team ready in case there are any complications. But yes, Mrs. Smith and I are both fine. Nobody else in the building should be concerned. Thank you. Keep me posted.”

Margot leaned against the wall with her arms folded, examining her flawlessly manicured nails. Inside her, something uncomfortable and dark was stirring. Ever since she was a child, Margot had hated being enclosed in spaces like these. They were suffocating, oppressive, and isolating. In those cramped quarters, it was almost as if the walls themselves were squeezing around her, trapping her like some hideous, claustrophobic vice.

That was all paranoia, though, Margot reminded herself. A childish fear with no basis in reality. She took a deep breath and looked up, pursing her lips with her usual display of unflappable composure. She was in control of herself. Even if she was scared—and she wasn't, obviously, that was just a stupid, irrational instinctual reflex of the animal brain—she wouldn't let it show. Especially not in front of Francesca Thurston.

“Well, seems like we're stuck here,” Margot said flatly, arching a questioning eyebrow at Francesca, who nodded in confirmation.

“Looks that way, unfortunately,” Francesca sighed with a rueful chuckle. “No point making a fuss. We'll just have to wait for them to fix it.”

Francesca seemed completely relaxed. She exuded the same casual confidence and warmth that she did on stage, her demeanor radiating calm strength and confidence. There was something reassuring about her presence that Margot had admired from the start, as much as she loathed to admit it. Despite her dislike of the woman, she understood why the voters found her so compelling. The senator projected an air of wisdom and reliability, combined with an effortless charisma and a passion that drew people in. People trusted Francesca. They wanted to follow her and be inspired by

her. There was something incredibly dangerous and powerful about that kind of magnetism.

Margot had it, too, but she'd worked hard for it. Countless hours of media training, elocution lessons, acting classes, and private coaching in public speaking. Thousands of dollars spent on image consultants, coaches, stylists, and more. All to produce a carefully crafted persona that conveyed competency, elegance, intelligence, and sincerity. It had worked like a charm. For as long as Margot could remember, though, from their earliest days on the national stage, Francesca had come naturally by what others struggled for and clawed at to attain. It was enough to nauseate a person.



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“You really did do an incredible job today, Francesca,” Margot conceded, breaking the silence after a few moments. “You owned that stage and had the crowd eating out of your hand. I have to respect that.”

It was a grudging admission, but a sincere one. They were both consummate professionals at the very highest echelon of their field, so a compliment was in order when appropriate. They may have spent the better part of the night ripping each other apart in public, but they each had immense admiration and respect for each other's skills and capabilities. It was easy to lose sight of that amidst the chaos and bloodlust of the battlefield.

Here, though, in this tiny metal box sealed away from the rest of the world, the harsh glare of the media lights couldn't touch them. Just two tired women with aching feet in heels and sore faces from smiling too many times a day. Two women who had lived and breathed their work for decades now, who poured their hearts and souls and bodies into service for their nation. They had a common purpose, albeit different goals, and underneath all the baggage and layers of artifice and defensiveness, there was real connection there, forged by years of shared sacrifice.

“And you sure know how to put on a show,” Francesca replied with a chuckle. “I might not always agree with your methods, but you've certainly honed the ability to captivate people. It's impressive.”

“Yes, well, we each play to our strengths.” Margot said smoothly, with a light shrug, the hint of a smirk playing at her lips. “We're both playing to people's feelings. You make them feel all warm and fuzzy with your optimism and idealism, while I appeal to their existing fear and anger to get my message across. Different strategies,

different platforms, same results.”

Margot felt her eyes flit across Francesca’s body. She was taller than Margot with an almost athletic physique and strong shoulders.

“You sound almost jealous, Margot,” Francesca observed drily with a playful glint in her warm brown eyes. “What’s the matter, afraid integrity and authenticity might be edging out divisiveness and manufactured outrage?”

Margot chuckled softly, running her fingers along the rail that ran down the side of the elevator. God, what was taking so long? The air was beginning to feel heavy around her, and she shifted slightly in place, trying to ignore the weight pressing on her shoulders. Don’t be silly, she reminded herself, this is an electric malfunction, not a collapsing mine shaft. Margot willed the racing anxiety in the back of her mind to quiet itself, focusing instead on the calm, reassuring brown eyes peering at her in the dim light.

“Better to be feared than loved and all that,” she teased, leaning back against the wall of the elevator and studying the senator closely. “And you’ve got the market cornered on virtue and wholesomeness, so if that leaves me to play the villain, that’s what I’ll do.”

Francesca laughed lightly, raising an eyebrow at her counterpart. Her posture was languid and relaxed, legs crossed comfortably beneath her and arms folded across her chest, with none of the tension and rigidity that seemed to grip Margot’s frame.

“Is it really all a game to you?” the senator asked her. The question sounded genuinely curious, not accusatory or hostile. “Every day, hundreds of thousands of Americans trust you with their futures. Do you really look at them the way you might chess pieces in a strategy game?”

Margot paused for a moment, tilting her head. There was something arrestingly soothing about this woman's voice, about the richness of tone and inflection, and the smooth, melodious depth of it. There was a faint trace of a New England accent there, but it had been gradually eroded by time in Washington, leaving a very neutral, professional-sounding alto behind. It suited her, Margot thought. It was dignified, eloquent, authoritative and steady, with a touch of humor and light. It was the sort of voice that made people want to trust her--to lean in close and listen intently.

“Sometimes,” Margot admitted after a moment. “When you spend so long breaking it all down into analytics and poll numbers and forecasts, people become numbers. Just a series of moves and countermoves. Don't tell me you never go there.”

Francesca wrinkled her brow and glanced off to the side, sighing deeply. She drummed her fingers thoughtfully on her thigh for a moment, then met Margot's gaze again with a nod of understanding.

“I work very hard to avoid it,” she replied finally. “It's a dangerous slope. Once you stop seeing people as actual human beings, once you convince yourself they're just data points on a map, then you start forgetting why we do this job in the first place. But the longer you do it, the easier it becomes to fall into that trap. There are certainly days when I find myself more concerned with the numbers than with the people behind them. It's hard work, to avoid becoming numb.”

It was a surprisingly candid response. Margot didn't know quite what to say. She'd expected some preachy lecture about morality and compassion, or perhaps a patronizing remark about the virtues of empathy. She had always believed that Francesca Thurston wasn't as pure and idealistic as she sometimes came across, but she hadn't expected to hear it right from the horse's mouth. It was enough to momentarily distract her from the fact that she was trapped in this tiny metal box.

“I have to imagine that it's easier to remember that it isn't all a game, when you aren't

constantly contorting yourself into whatever shape the voters seem to want at any given time,” Margot quipped, with a sardonic twist of her lip. “Hard to think of other people as human when I don't even really treat myself as one most of the time.”

She immediately regretted saying that. It was too honest, too personal, and it revealed an emotional vulnerability that she couldn't afford to expose. This dark, enclosed space was getting to her, pushing her fears and doubts right up to the surface. And Francesca was so steady and open and welcoming, and it was so long since Margot had opened up to anyone, and it all just kind of tumbled out of her before she could stop it. Margot swallowed, squeezing her eyes shut and silently berating herself for this uncharacteristic slip. A weakness of the hour, she told herself. That was all.

A soft hand rested gently over hers. She opened her eyes again and found Francesca's warm, sympathetic eyes locked onto her own with a gentle, knowing tenderness that was utterly disarming. Her touch felt soothing and comforting, sending a jolt of electricity coursing through Margot's body from head to toe.

“That sounds terribly lonely,” Francesca murmured sympathetically, her thumb absently stroking Margot's wrist in a way that set off a flood of adrenaline in her chest. Francesca's full lips looked so very tempting. “We all have to be mindful of our image in this business, but we need spaces where we can just exist authentically. Excuse me if I'm overstepping, but do you have a space like that?”

The question pierced her armor like a well-aimed arrow. Did she? Margot had spent her life crafting facades to hide behind, and somewhere along the way she had forgotten which version of herself was the real one. Everyone around her, even the man she had married, was there to only to serve some greater purpose. People were useful. Beneficial. All a part of a carefully curated narrative with specific roles to play and lines to recite.

“It's too much of a risk to let people get too close,” she reasoned, repeating the same

line she had told herself since she first ran for a seat in Congress. If people knew too much, they would inevitably use her secrets against her. Nobody could be trusted completely, Margot had decided many years ago.

Still, Francesca's hand on hers felt warm and comforting. Her skin was soft and delicate, but her grip was firm. The other woman smelled faintly of expensive perfume--an earthy, sensual blend of spice and wood with a sweet floral undertone that evoked the image of lush tropical flowers blooming in some hidden garden. She was standing close enough that Margot noticed how thick and dark those eyelashes were, framing deep, cocoa pools of liquid warmth that were staring back at her with a level of affection and concern that Margot wasn't accustomed to seeing directed her way. Francesca's lips were full and plush, slightly parted. They seemed inviting in the dim light.

Maybe it was the wine Margot had drunk at dinner. Maybe it was the looming sense that the walls were closing in and an instinctive, primal part of her feared that she was going to die here. Maybe it was the years of crippling loneliness and isolation from genuine human connection. Or perhaps it was just the sheer magnetic pull of that warm, dazzling smile that had captured America's heart. Most likely, it was all three.

Whatever the reason, at that moment, Margot leaned in and closed the distance between them. She kissed those enticing lips with a heated passion, feeling the other woman tense with surprise under her touch, then melt in an instant. A fire ignited in her stomach, burning bright and fierce, and she heard Francesca's soft moan of approval as she hungrily returned her kiss, wrapping her free hand around Margot's waist to pull her closer. The taste of merlot lingered in their mouths, and Margot gasped as Francesca's teeth caught her lower lip in a teasing nip.

The other woman's hands were on the small of her back now, then sliding down, one coming to rest on her backside while the other continued down her thigh. Each caress sent jolts of pleasure up Margot's spine, making her dizzy, setting every nerve ending

on fire and sending bolts of lightning crackling through her body in a way she hadn't felt in many many years. The heat between them was nearly unbearable now, and it was all she could do to keep her breathing even, to stay standing on trembling knees, clutching desperately at the back of Francesca's shirt with one hand and grabbing a fistful of black hair in the other.

Margot lost track of time as they stood there tangled in each other's embrace, hands wandering, tongues dancing. She pressed her forehead against Francesca's, their chests heaving with exertion, each ragged breath catching in her throat. It was unlike anything she had ever felt before. Even in her reckless youth, when she had freely indulged in physical pleasures, before the world of politics forced her to maintain a squeaky clean image, she had never experienced such overwhelming, unrestrained intensity. It was addictive, intoxicating, and Margot never wanted it to end.

Just as she was about to reach for the buttons on Francesca's blouse, however, a loud humming noise filled the air. Suddenly, the lights flickered on and the elevator lurched to life. It began to move upward slowly and both women broke apart, gasping and fumbling to straighten their clothing and adjust their hair. Margot blinked furiously, adjusting to the glare of the overhead lighting. She felt her cheeks flush bright crimson as she adjusted her jacket, pulling it tightly across her body and trying desperately to regain some semblance of decorum.

After several moments of awkward silence, they reached their destination on the second floor, and the doors slid open with an ominously cheerful ding. Outside, a full team of heavily armed security officers, campaign staffers, and mechanics awaited, ready for action. A young man rushed in to check their vital signs while the hotel manager nervously babbled apologies and offered lavish complimentary gifts to compensate for this unfortunate incident.

It was a whirlwind of commotion and drama that lasted for a good ten minutes until everyone finally calmed down enough to reassure each other that they were perfectly

all right. In that time, the two women didn't so much as exchange glances, each preoccupied with reestablishing control and managing the situation. Margot slipped into her politician's mask effortlessly, giving the same answers she'd been trained to repeat on autopilot, making jokes about the ridiculousness of their predicament and dismissing concerns with nonchalance and charm. She was utterly composed, outwardly unaffected, showing no hint of any inner turmoil.

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Eventually it all died down, and the crowd began to disperse. Just as Francesca was preparing to leave, Margot caught her eye. For a moment, the world around them froze. Then, with a crooked smirk that was utterly charming despite its smugness, Margot placed one hand on her hip and tilted her head.

“Senator,” she said smoothly with an easy, practiced grin, “would you care to continue our conversation privately?”

7

### FRANCESCA

Francesca's thoughts spun in chaotic circles, flashing in rapid-fire succession like fireworks going off all around her. The last hour had been a rollercoaster and she felt utterly disoriented and off-balance. One minute, she'd been standing in an elevator with Margot Smith, exchanging barbs like normal, and the next, they were making out like horny teenagers. Now her icy rival was standing before her, watching her with those inscrutable ice-blue eyes, offering a devilishly tempting suggestion.

Francesca's heart raced in her chest and she tried to stay calm, keeping her expression neutral. This was probably a terrible idea. But on the other hand, was it? Francesca had never hidden anything. If this somehow got out, which neither of them would want it to, it would be exponentially worse for Margot than it would be for her. Oh, it would be disastrous for her too, but for Margot, the ramifications would be catastrophic. The press would destroy her.

So what if she said yes? No harm, no foul, right? Why shouldn't they take advantage



of whatever this overwhelming chemistry was?

“Certainly, Congresswoman,” Francesca replied in a calm, neutral tone of voice. “Would you care to accompany me to my suite?”

Without another word, she turned confidently, motioning for Margot to follow as she strode confidently down the hall. On the inside, her heart was racing at a million miles per hour, pounding frantically against her ribcage and sending adrenaline surging through her veins. This was all madness, she realized that, but in that moment, it just seemed so damn appealing, the fiery intensity in those pale blue eyes beckoning her like the brightest flame.

Francesca walked calmly and deliberately, taking measured, graceful steps. She maintained her dignified posture and avoided eye contact with the guards who flanked them protectively. Neither of the two women spoke as they made their way into down the hall and into the large suite reserved for Francesca. The door fell shut behind them with a soft, muffled click.

Once they were alone again, Francesca whirled around to face Margot, meeting that fiery, intense stare with a challenging grin of her own.

“This is an interesting way to try and throw me off my game, Mrs. Smith,” Francesca teased, folding her arms over her chest and arching an amused eyebrow. “I didn't realize you had it in you to play the honeypot. Not quite in line with your traditional family values platform, is it?”

Margot took a step forward, her lips curling into a sultry little smirk that sent butterflies soaring in Francesca's stomach. Margot moved with a quiet, seductive grace, prowling toward her target like a lion stalking its prey, the faint rustling of fabric whispering in her wake. There was a hunger in those sharp, piercing eyes--a glint that made the pit of Francesca's stomach flutter with anticipation. The air felt

heavy and charged with energy. Every breath she drew seemed full of the scent of wine and perfume. When Margot was only inches away from her, she tilted her head and gave a low, husky chuckle.

“Oh, don't underestimate what I'd do to get ahead, Francesca,” Margot said, her drawling accent wrapping around Francesca's name in a way that sent a thrill down her spine. “I'm willing to play a little dirty.”

With that, she surged forward, crashing her lips against Francesca's in a heated kiss, her hands roaming across Francesca's body. The onslaught was sudden and aggressive, forceful and passionate. There was nothing fake about Margot's overwhelming desire, of that, Francesca was sure. Francesca let out a low moan of desire, sinking against Margot's body as she returned the heated embrace. Hands clutched eagerly at clothing, yanking at zippers and buttons, tearing fabric aside and tossing items carelessly to the side until the women were left wearing only their lingerie.

Francesca drank in the sight of Margot with undisguised admiration. Margot was gorgeous—slender with a long, sleek physique sculpted to perfection by hours of work with personal trainers and dieticians. Her body looked nothing like the 54 years Francesca knew her to be. She radiated a power and vitality that was irresistibly attractive, her presence both imposing and alluring at once. There wasn't a trace of vulnerability or self-consciousness in the woman's demeanor and her lips curled into a satisfied smirk at Francesca's open appreciation of her body in white lace lingerie.

They collapsed together onto the bed, limbs tangling around each other as they tumbled into the plush comforter, hands greedily exploring every inch of exposed skin. Their bodies moved together in a desperate, frenzied rhythm, the room filled with the soft sounds of their moans and sighs, lips and tongues tasting and touching and teasing. They battled for control, each of them alternately giving in and resisting, until Margot ended up straddling Francesca's hips, pinning her arms above her head

with one hand while the other pushed past the waistband of her panties and slid between her legs.

Francesca gasped, her back arching at the shock of pleasure that shot through her at Margot's touch. Margot's fingers expertly explored her, tracing torturously slow circles around her clit with that same infuriating, breathtaking triumphant smirk playing across her lovely face. Francesca struggled briefly, testing Margot's grip on her wrists, but it was a half-hearted effort at best. Her resolve crumbled quickly as Margot sank her teeth into the delicate skin at the base of her neck, tongue flicking out to tease her with little licks and kisses. Francesca's head spun, drunk on the intoxicating combination of lust and anger, surrender and defiance, desire and disdain.

All coherent thought vanished as Margot continued to build the tension, her long fingers sliding further south, and suddenly Francesca felt Margot's fingers push inside of her. She moaned and arched into it. Margot's hips rolled against Francesca's thigh in a mesmerizing motion, matching the pace set by her ministrations. The women locked gazes, the air between them thick with tension, their heavy breathing and moaning the only sound to interrupt the stillness. Those cool blue eyes watched Francesca like a hawk watches a rabbit. With amusement, delight, interest, focus, fascination, and hunger--but always with control and authority.

Francesca wasn't usually one to cede ground and submit to someone else's desires, but right now, all she wanted was to give in to this deliciously dark and forbidden temptation. Although she'd spent an embarrassing amount of time contemplating Margot's beauty and magnetic allure, she had never realistically imagined it coming to anything. Even in her wildest, most secret fantasies, Francesca never dared to let her train of thought travel this far. In her dreams, though, the woman on top of her, fucking her, had been just as hungry and eager for her touch as she was in reality. Now that Francesca was finally living it, she couldn't help but indulge wholeheartedly.

After a few tortured, delicious minutes of Margot's handiwork, she released Francesca's wrists and slithered down her body, trailing a wet path between her breasts and down her navel, planting teasing bites and kisses that made her gasp and shudder with pleasure. As Margot pulled Francesca's panties off and settled between her legs, she looked up briefly, holding her gaze as she gave an impudent wink, then licked her lips eagerly.

With the ease of someone who had definitely gone down on women before, Margot dived forward, pressing her mouth to Francesca's soaking pussy and licking the length of her vulva in a broad stroke. Francesca moaned loudly and threaded her fingers through Margot's hair, tugging it free of the clips that still barely held the neatly styled waves in place. Margot's hair flowed loose and silken between her fingers as her mouth devoured Francesca as though she was water in a desert.

The enthusiasm with which Margot ate her out was a huge turn on for Francesca. It wasn't long before she was thrusting her hips forwards and seeking more.

She opened her eyes as she felt Margot pull away for a second and slow things right down.

"Oh now, Senator. What is this you seek when you thrust your hips to me?" Margo drawled, her voice slow and sexy.

Francesca felt a desperate need deep within her. She also felt embarrassingly lost for words.

"Oh, sweet Francesca, where are your words?" Margot casually and seductively as a cat licked the fingers that she had fucked Francesca with, making an absolute performance out of it.

Francesca couldn't take her eyes off her. She thought she might explode.

“Please..” she begged.

“Please, what, baby?”

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“Please... fuck me..” Francesca somehow managed to mutter the words she needed.

“That’s better,” Margot smiled, smugly. “How sweet it is to hear you beg.” She sucked long and slow on her index finger as Francesca lay below her open and exposed. “And how sweet your pretty pussy tastes, Francesca.”

Margot’s right hand moved back between Francesca’s legs, fingers pushed hard and deep inside her, reached for her G spot and took back the rhythm of fucking her. Fucking her deep and slow. Fucking her harder and faster. Margot’s thumb sliding against her clitoris as she fucked her. Francesca heard her own moans getting louder as she felt her climax begin to build deep within her.

All the while, Francesca kept one hand twisted in the sheets, gripping them tightly and twisting them between her fingers as her entire body trembled in response to the stimulation. Margot was relentless, holding Francesca firmly in place until her moans became uncontrollably loud, wracking through her in ragged bursts.

“I want you to come for me, Francesca. Come for my fingers deep inside you.”

Francesca was nodding, mumbling, moaning as Margot fucked her harder and faster.

After several glorious moments of this exquisite torture, she finally hit the edge, her orgasm shattering through her in waves of ecstasy and pleasure.

Margot pulled back, looking immensely pleased with herself as Francesca writhed with abandon. Once she came down a little, still panting heavily, Margot crawled up over her, biting her lip in excitement. She hovered over her, their faces mere inches

apart, and her mouth found Francesca's again. As they kissed hungrily, Francesca reached up, stroking the smooth planes of Margot's flawless porcelain skin. She traced her fingers lightly along her back, shoulders, and stomach, savoring the silky feeling beneath her fingertips. Her mind buzzed with white noise and foggy euphoria.

“My turn,” Margot breathed, eyes flashing with dangerous delight as she grinned wickedly against Francesca's lips.

Before she could respond, Margot sat up and scooted forward, lowering herself down onto Francesca's face with a sultry look. Francesca eagerly responded by eagerly returning the favor, running her tongue up the length of her. Her hands dug tightly into Margot's long, toned thighs to hold her in place, and she felt the muscles tense beneath her palms as Margot threw back her head with a moan. Francesca licked and sucked eagerly, enjoying the taste of her on her tongue and the way her body reacted to every movement of her mouth.

Margot rocked her hips with increasing intensity, riding Francesca's face with wild abandon as she gripped the headboard of the bed tightly. Her moans got louder as she ground down harder on Francesca's face. Francesca could barely breathe, but she didn't care. Eventually, Margot cried out in ecstatic release, hips jerking erratically as she trembled on top of Francesca, who clung to her firmly. Francesca eagerly took Margot's orgasm in her mouth swallowing whatever she could and eagerly lapping up every drop from Margot's pussy before letting go, allowing Margot to collapse limply to the side with a sigh.

For a minute or two, neither spoke as they lay beside each other catching their breaths. The weight of what they'd done started to sink in, and Francesca felt her pulse quickening slightly. The high slowly faded, replaced by a vague sense of panic and confusion. What were they doing? This was insane. Margot was her rival, a mortal enemy on the campaign trail, the worst person she might possibly have chosen to have a one-night stand with.

She glanced to her right and saw Margot staring fixedly at the ceiling, something like panic flitting through those striking blue eyes. Her brow was furrowed with frustration, as if she was just realizing the same things Francesca was. The congresswoman pushed herself up off the bed, shaking her head in disbelief. For a moment, Francesca thought she was about to bolt, but instead she just turned and strode naked across the suite toward the bar at the opposite corner, pouring a glass of wine with a shaky hand.

Francesca sat up, too, covering herself self-consciously with the sheet, suddenly aware of how exposed she was. They eyed each other silently for a moment, their gazes locked in an intense stare. An awkward pause hung in the air between them. Francesca could practically hear Margot's brain whirring in time with her own. Okay. This was not good. What the hell had she been thinking, having sex with this woman? Yes, they were both attractive, and yes, the chemistry was off the charts. But this could absolutely destroy both their careers if word got out.

“This never happened,” Margot said curtly, breaking the silence with a razor-sharp tone that brooked no room for argument.

It wasn't that Francesca disagreed, but something about the absolutely ice-cold delivery rubbed her the wrong way. Margot Smith was many things—fascinating and intimidating and complicated and mysterious. She was also rude and arrogant and emotionally stunted. And married. To a man. Crying and screaming about traditional values and family morals and how identity politics and diversity were ruining the country with one hand, yet clearly perfectly happy to bury her face between Francesca's legs behind closed doors.

“You are such a damn hypocrite,” Francesca spat out before she could stop herself, glowering indignantly as she swung her legs over the edge of the bed. “This was far from your first time, Miss Perfect Conservative Christian Wife. All that moral outrage about my sexuality, all the vitriol and hate you spew at me and people like



me, and now you expect me to just play along with your lying hypocrisy?"

"It's called strategic compartmentalization, Francesca," Margot replied coolly, looking shameless as she stood there naked, leaning against the bar and sipping her wine. "And yes, I do. This looks bad for you too. Unless you want to make that tabloid headline that'll torpedo your candidacy, let's make a mutual decision to forget this happened."

Francesca bit back a sharp retort. As much as she wanted to put Margot in her place, she did have a point. Francesca's image was in a precarious position. The general public accepted her as an openly gay candidate, mostly, as long as it didn't get too in-your-face about it. If she was a successful leader, her sexuality was acceptable, if she didn't emphasize it too much. Getting caught in bed with her opponent, though--a careless, irresponsible flight of passion in the midst of a very serious, highly charged campaign? Neither of them would ever recover. The sordid scandal would be the only thing anyone remembered.

"Fine," Francesca grudgingly conceded, frowning disapprovingly at the blonde, who shrugged uncaringly. "This never happened, and it's never going to happen again. I hope we both agree on that."

"Absolutely," Margot agreed. "This was a terrible mistake. Let's chalk it up to a lapse of judgment and move on."

For some reason, that stung a little. Margot sounded so clinical about the whole thing, as if it were just another notch in an infinite line of meaningless hookups, never to be repeated, nor discussed, ever again. As misguided, unwise, and potentially ruinous this had been, it wasn't in Francesca's nature to just dismiss people like they meant nothing, especially not after a night like this. She had never been the type to engage in meaningless hook-ups and one-night stands. Sex was important to Francesca. So was intelligent conversation, emotional connection, trust, and respect. The way

Margot spoke now, it was like Francesca was just some anonymous stranger she'd bumped into in a bar, never to see again. It didn't sit well with her.

She wanted to say more to keep the discussion going. Francesca wanted to challenge the woman about her apparent indifference. But the fact remained that Margot was right. This had been a mistake. A reckless, adrenaline-fueled, irresponsible, potentially disastrous error of judgment. As soon as it was over and the post-coital haze had lifted, it was unbelievable that Francesca had let herself get swept up in this madness for even a second.

“Agreed,” she sighed with a brisk nod. “You'd better get back to your loving husband, Margot. We'll never speak of this again.”

Her tone was tinged with bitterness and anger. If Margot was bothered by it, though, it certainly didn't show. She shrugged casually, threw back the rest of her wine, and then picked her clothes up off the floor and got dressed in silence. Without another word or so much as a backward glance in Francesca's direction, Margot Smith let herself out of the room, leaving behind an angry, confused Francesca glaring pointedly in her wake.

As soon as the door shut, Francesca collapsed back down on the bed and stared blankly up at the ceiling. What the hell had just happened? What had she been thinking? She buried her face in her hands and groaned softly. This could not have been a worse disaster.

But good God, it had felt incredible.

If there was one thing Margot knew how to do well, it was compartmentalize. No matter what was happening around her, no matter what complications arose or which external factors threatened to undermine her goals, she would shut those feelings away in a box and focus on what needed to be done. Therefore, from the moment Margot left Francesca's suite in the middle of the night, that chapter of her life was finished and sealed away. Whatever strange feelings had awoken to drive Margot into that hotel bed, the passion of their encounter, her conflicted desires and all the confusing emotions were shut away in a box. Their interaction wasn't allowed to exist anymore, so it didn't. The door was closed and it would stay closed.

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Now, a week later, it was as if nothing had happened at all. Another day, another speech, another campaign stop, another press conference, another rally, another fundraiser. Margot smiled at photographers, shook hands with supporters, hugged children, and delivered polished, eloquent speeches in every state and county listed in her busy itinerary.

The debate had been a wash—some of the undecided voters had been swayed by Francesca's passionate ideals and sincere conviction, while others had been drawn to Margot's cunning strategy and assertive confidence. The polls showed an almost perfect 50/50 split between them. That simply wouldn't do. Margot needed to strike fast and hard. She needed a game changer. An attack that would rattle Francesca to her core, leaving the public questioning everything they thought they knew about her.

“Is this really necessary, Margie?” William questioned as they sat down for breakfast at their rented apartment in Arlington near the campaign headquarters. “It's risky. Maybe we should table it until the next debate. See if we can edge out a lead without resorting to the big guns.”

Margot took a sip of black coffee, leveling an unimpressed glare at her husband across the table. She folded her paper placidly, carefully putting it aside and fixing him with a solemn gaze. She didn't like being questioned, especially not by her own partner in crime. William was useful. He was obedient, deferential, and supportive, and he came from a very wealthy family with strong political ties, which gave her a natural boost in connections and resources. She had always been the mastermind, though, and that was what had gotten them here. His protests were irritating.

“Do you have any ideas to win this election?” she asked coldly, raising an eyebrow.

“‘Wait and see’ isn’t going to get us to the White House, Will. We did that with Bennett, and it almost cost me the nomination. I’m not taking that chance. I know what I’m doing.”

It had been unfortunate, really, having to throw Tim under the bus like that. They had served together in Congress for many years and he was an esteemed member of her party. Smart, dependable, charismatic, wise, and cunning. It hadn’t come as a surprise that Tim was ahead in the early primary elections. He was exactly the kind of person their voter base liked- having a penis also helped his cause- and even many voters on the left admired his experience and charm. At least, until the rumors about him accepting illegal campaign funds began and his popularity plummeted overnight. Tragic, really. Such a darn shame he got in her way.

Margot had to work harder than him and be better, purely for the fact of her being a woman. But, she was used to that, and she knew she was brilliant. She could do this.

“But you didn’t lose, Margie,” William pointed out cautiously. “We’re not that desperate yet. We can afford to be strategic and play this out slowly. If this backfires, you end up looking duplicitous and conniving. We don’t want that kind of mud slung our way. You’ve worked too hard to earn everyone’s trust for that to disappear because of rash decisions.”

“Where is this sudden lack of faith coming from?” Margot demanded, voice calm but her words cutting and threatening all the same. “We’ve been playing this game for twenty years, Will. Don’t tell me you’ve suddenly gone and developed a moral compass, now of all times. This has been a long time coming and we need to finish what we started.”

“Margie,” he said with a sigh, reaching out to put a comforting hand over hers. “You’ve been on edge all week. It isn’t like you to throw caution to the wind like this when it isn’t absolutely necessary. I just?—”

“It is absolutely necessary,” she cut back, glowering at him. “Francesca Thurston is gaining traction too quickly. She's smart, determined, and a formidable adversary. People just love her natural charisma. All that passion and energy. She's like this flawless, diamond-bright star shining down on the common folk, making them believe in impossible things. I hate that woman, William. I want her out of the picture. Now.”

Margot clenched her fist, trying to steady her breathing. Her tone was tinged with unmasked loathing. Ever since that night at the hotel. Just thinking about her opponent's smug face, her silky black hair, full lips, and winning smile felt like being taunted during every interview. The memories filled Margot with burning rage. Flashbacks to how good she had tasted, how much Margot had enjoyed having Francesca and her beautiful body under her spell. Her clear brown eyes looking up obediently as she submitted to Margot. How absolutely turned on Margot had been when Francesca came hot and hard on her command.

Stop it, Margot!

Francesca Thurston was getting under her skin, and that was unacceptable. She needed her out of the equation entirely. Right now.

“What's gotten into you?” William sighed, giving his wife a weary look. “Look, I get that you're frustrated. I am, too. But you're usually more pragmatic than this. There's no use stirring up a hornet's nest unless there's no other choice. I'm with you. You know that. But I don't see why we should pull this trigger so recklessly right now.”

Margot took a deep breath, nodding thoughtfully as she composed herself. Will had a point. This wasn't normal behavior. In all her years in the game, she had never been one to panic and act hastily, not even as a young congresswoman facing her first real contest. Margot had never felt a fire like this burning in her before. The fury, the resentment, the overwhelming need to destroy someone she couldn't stop thinking

about. Politics didn't get personal for Margot. She had always been driven solely by clear reasoning, cool calculation, and careful logic.

It was just the high stakes of it all, she told herself. Every moment of her life had led to this moment, and in a few months, she would know whether that had all been in vain. Thirty years of relentless dedication to a singular goal, building a pedestal higher and higher, and it all culminated in this. In Margot versus that infuriating, captivating progressive who had no business standing in her way. It wasn't about Francesca personally. Of course it wasn't. That would be ludicrous. It was pure professional pride, and the drive to achieve success. Nothing more.

One of them would become the first female president of the United States and Margot knew it had to be her.

“Fine. We'll discuss it with the team at the meeting later, see what they think,” Margot finally relented, rising to her feet and straightening her jacket. “I can't promise anything, but we'll see. Let's head to the office.”

William followed her dutifully as Margot swept out of the door and into the car, ready for another morning briefing before they made their next round of appearances. She flipped through her paperwork, preparing for the upcoming events with practiced efficiency. During the entire fifteen-minute trip, Margot found herself struggling to compose her thoughts. Her mind kept drifting away from campaign strategies and onto Francesca.

Francesca's lovely full breasts moving as Margot fucked her. The way Francesca's body had opened up for her and beckoned her in.

The exquisite pleasure Margot had felt as she ground down on Francesca's face to take her own orgasm. How much she had enjoyed feeling Francesca lick her clean afterwards.

Lord. Why did it have to be so good?

Damn it, this wasn't supposed to have happened. Why was that woman still haunting her this much? Margot was good at pushing aside her personal feelings. It was a necessity of this profession, and she had mastered the technique long ago. There wasn't any room for doubt or hesitation. Not while she was fighting tooth-and-nail for this presidency.

Still, the image of Francesca's beautiful naked body lingered in her memory, imprinted on her eyelids so vividly that she could see it even when she squeezed her eyes shut. The feel of soft, smooth skin against hers, the tang of sweat and sex in the air, the rich earthy scent of Francesca's perfume still lingering in her nose. What was wrong with her? How could one stupid mistake have rattled her so badly?

By the time they got downtown to the campaign headquarters in the modern high-rise, Margot's mood was absolutely foul. The last thing she wanted to deal with was her idiot campaign manager and the pathetic interns who ran her social media accounts. Charlotte, her chief political strategist, was probably the only person she could stand. Charlotte was a brilliant young woman in her early thirties who had first worked as Margot's intern in Congress straight out of college, and had quickly proven herself. Ten years later, the fiery, ambitious redhead had earned the right to be part of Margot's inner circle.

The others were all incredibly skilled, naturally—Margot wouldn't hire anyone but the best—but they were also insufferable. Right now, Peter, the campaign manager, was self-indulgently droning on and on about how effective his efforts were, patting himself on the back for every pointless trick and tactic he'd managed to employ over the past weeks. The man acted like he was single-handedly responsible for all her gains in the polls, as if she were a puppet and he was pulling her strings. Disgusting little man.



She tried to tune out Peter's blabbering as she perused the various emails, letters, and televised clips compiled by Tom, their lead data analyst, while the team debated how to approach the upcoming televised town hall meeting with their competition. Unfortunately, all Margot could seem to pay attention to was how distractingly good Francesca looked in this particular clip. That shade of green looked exquisite with her complexion, and the tasteful golden jewelry suited her regal features perfectly. Even from a low-quality YouTube video, Margot could tell that Francesca carried herself with elegance and authority, speaking with confidence and intelligence.

"Uh, Mrs. Smith, excuse me," piped up a nervous voice from the doorway.

Margot blinked and composed herself, looking up at Michael, the handsome, boyish-looking blond who was in charge of publicity and outreach. She tilted her head, taking in the look of concern on his face. He rarely interrupted meetings, since he was constantly on the phone with some donor or event organizer somewhere across the country. Something was up.

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“Yes, what is it, Michael?” she asked briskly. “Anything I need to be aware of?”

“Well,” he replied anxiously, licking his lips and glancing around the room. “Do you have a minute in private, ma'am? It's a sensitive situation.”

Instantly, she was on high alert. Her staff exchanged curious glances as she got up from the chair and walked out of the room with him. Margot felt uneasy as she followed him to an empty meeting room in a nearby corridor, shutting the door behind them. Michael was sweating and fidgeting nervously, as if he really didn't want to deliver whatever information he was holding back. She crossed her arms expectantly, arching an impatient eyebrow while she waited. Finally, he swallowed hard and met her eyes.

“There's no easy way to break this, ma'am, so I'll just come out with it,” he sighed, reaching into the file folder he had been clutching tightly and producing a series of printed photos. “We've been contacted by a woman who calls herself 'Cassandra.' She says she has compromising photos of you from college. She's demanding a million dollars or else she will send these pictures to every news outlet she can reach.”

Margot grabbed the folder with a furious glare, skimming through the glossy shots. Like the one William had been sent earlier, they were grainy, low-resolution and blurry, but in these, it was easier to make out her facial features. The other woman's face was blurred, but they were both mostly naked, locked in passionate embraces. She could practically feel the humiliation crawling under her skin, which is what she'd feel if these got out to the public. A single photo Margot could plausibly deny as having been doctored or edited. But five of them, with both her and the other woman partially identifiable, would be a recipe for complete destruction.

As much as Margot racked her brain, she couldn't for the life of her recall who this woman might be. There had been quite a few reckless, drunken nights in college, with all sorts of pretty girls who weren't interesting enough to warrant a second date, let alone for their names to stick. Those had been such carefree days, when the only things that mattered were Margot's studies, the next party, and which cute girl she was going to seduce there. She had been carefree, stupid, and thoughtless. A phase that she'd moved on from in her junior year--the moment she'd set her sights on a political career.

Before then, though, Margot had been rather wild in her partying, breaking free from her conservative, strict parents for the first time. She didn't miss it, she told herself. Margot had no regrets about the choices she had made since then. But sometimes she wondered what her life might have been like, had she chosen personal fulfillment and freedom over ambition.

But regret was a waste of time and something lesser mortals succumbed to. All that mattered now was fixing this mess--and cleaning up whomever was causing her this inconvenience.

"So, pay her," Margot snapped impatiently, tossing the photos back down on the table in disgust. "It's a million measly dollars compared to what this campaign is worth. Pay her off, track down her identity, and offer her a settlement in exchange for an NDA. I'm sure we can manage that without causing a scandal."

"Of course, Mrs. Smith," Michael replied, nodding earnestly. "I just wanted to consult you before moving forward."

"Who knows about this?" Margot demanded, waving vaguely at the stack of humiliating images.

"No one besides me, ma'am," Michael assured her quickly.

“Good. Fill in Charlotte and William and have them sort out the details. No one else. Understood?” Margot clarified, icily.

“Yes, ma'am,” the frightened-looking man agreed, backing away with a pale expression. “Will do right away, Mrs. Smith.”

Without further ado, Margot spun on her heels and stalked out of the room, seething internally. Her mood was already in an abysmal state, and now this. Her heart raced as her mind churned through all the possible implications and ramifications. What gave this damn woman the audacity to make such demands?

Were Francesca Thurston and her campaign involved in this? Of course they were. The bitch must have gone snooping, trying to dig up dirt after that unfortunate encounter in the hotel. The senator couldn't leak details of that night without also implicating herself, but now Francesca knew that that certainly wasn't Margot's first time with a woman, she would have gone digging. She would keep her mouth shut in public, but her allies and consultants would almost certainly be investigating any signs of a sordid lesbian past to exploit her sexuality and to try to use it as leverage against her. Now they had found a perfect opportunity. How utterly shameless and revolting. Utterly disgusting.

But then, why would the woman ask for money? came a small voice deep beneath the rising paranoia, insecurity, and fury. If this was the Thurston campaign's doing, the obvious response would be to just publish the photos and be done with it. Because ruining Margot's chances at the presidential nomination and sabotaging all Margot's hard work would be worth far more than a million dollars to her opponent. At this stage in the campaign, it would practically guarantee Francesca's victory.

Margot wasn't thinking rationally right now, though. Her whole world felt like it was crumbling around her, and she couldn't shake off the sinking fear that her secret was now beyond her control. As she stepped back into the conference hall where her

executive staff gathered, a hush fell over them all. Everyone was staring at her intently, looking expectant and apprehensive.

“Charlotte,” she announced quietly, giving the redhead a meaningful glance. “It's time to release the dogs. This can no longer wait for the right moment. Go. Do your thing. Find a way to bring that bitch down.”

Margot left the room without another word, retreating to her private office. Her blood was boiling, her palms sweating, her stomach tight. She collapsed heavily into the couch against one wall, letting her head fall into her hands. She breathed deeply, trying to steady the raging storm within. Something prickled behind her eyes, making them sting uncomfortably. It felt foreign and unfamiliar.

For the first time in twenty years, Margot Smith cried.

9

## FRANCESCA

The mayhem that greeted Francesca when she walked into the office at seven o'clock on Monday morning was like nothing she had ever seen before. Staffers and interns scrambled back and forth, rushing from desk to desk, muttering panicked statements and shoving hastily scrawled notes back and forth in a frenzy of chaos and activity. Francesca blinked several times, trying to comprehend what was happening.

“Frankie!” Juliet exclaimed, hurrying forward to greet her boss. “Come on. Emergency meeting. Everyone's prepped and waiting for us.”

They hurriedly made their way into the official meeting room, where a dozen anxious-looking faces were watching the door. Her team had been up all night since they received a call from a friend at a news station, letting them know about the

headline that was about to be plastered across every front page in America. Anonymous sources had been gathering ammunition all weekend and now, whatever the plan had been, the gears were already moving.

“All right. Let's figure this out,” Francesca told the room, taking a seat and folding her hands in front of her, her tone calm and measured. “This is not going to derail us. It's all a bunch of nonsense with no basis in reality, but we do need to figure out how to navigate it. Let's hash out a strategy. Go.”

A flurry of voices all interjected at once. Fingers were pointed, papers shuffled, and arguments thrown out in a chaotic symphony of competing sound and energy. As the commotion roared around her, Francesca closed her eyes and took a long, steady breath.

“Guys, relax,” she called out with an exasperated chuckle, clapping to get everyone's attention. “We've been working together for years and we've dealt with controversy and malicious rumors before. We don't need to get unraveled over this. Jules, why don't you start by giving us a quick recap of what we know?”

Juliet cleared her throat, leaning forward with her pen and notebook, “Okay, so essentially, Claire Howell, one of our former financial managers, has gone on the record claiming that you misappropriated a large chunk of campaign donations and embezzled millions of dollars for your own personal use, Frankie. She's saying we paid her off to keep quiet about the situation, and they've got anonymous sources corroborating these claims.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Francesca nodded calmly, leaning back in her chair as she listened to her campaign manager run through the gist of the story they had been dealing with. Claire had worked for her for almost ten years, but had left at the start of the year for personal reasons. As far as Francesca knew, they'd been on perfectly good terms, but good terms didn't mean much in politics. Especially not when Margot Smith and her endless bank account were involved.

The allegations themselves were ridiculous. They had kept a detailed paper trail of every transaction, so they'd be able to compile a full financial report refuting the entire scandal within a matter of days. The trouble was that a few days was a lifetime in the media cycle. The average voter who only read the headlines and watched a few snippets on the evening news might not bother to do a deep dive into financial records a few days from now.

Claire, by all accounts, was a trustworthy source with deep insight into the campaign, and her perceived credibility loaned itself to easy acceptance of the news reports without much skepticism. After all, why would this reputable, esteemed ex-employee risk her reputation and livelihood, going on Good Morning America with her full name attached to mere speculation? She wouldn't if she didn't have substantial proof, people would assume. And the opposition would go wild with this long before they could produce evidence to disprove it. A few days of this kind of bad publicity could have serious long-term consequences for their electoral chances.

"This is a line-for-line rehash of what happened with Tim Bennett," said Evelyn, one of their lead PR consultants. "Right down to the disgruntled ex-employee coming out of nowhere to spin a story about financial wrongdoing. Not exactly creative, is it?"

“Well, it buried Tim,” Francesca pointed out grimly. “It doesn't have to be creative if it works, right? A rumor like this, in the right media context, might sink the race entirely.”

“Yes,” Evelyn conceded. “Even if we have the truth on our side, it's a long shot that most of the public will hear about it. So we need to get ahead of the story. I assume we're already working on getting those reports in order?”

“Legal and finance have been on it for hours,” Juliet confirmed with a nod. “By tomorrow morning, we'll have a full picture of what's going on, and we'll get that into the media as soon as we can. Meanwhile, we need to start spinning the narrative in our direction. Claire's going on air at nine sharp, so we need a plan of action in place by then.”

“Let's just lay this out on the table. How certain are we that there's no truth to this?” asked David, her campaign spokesperson, raising a wary eyebrow.

“Really, Dave?” Francesca asked with a light laugh, tilting her head skeptically. “This is my team. We've all worked together for years. Are you really suggesting that I'd stoop this low?”

“Hey, hey, don't shoot the messenger,” David protested, putting up his hands in defense with a grin. “If I'm going to get up there and give a statement, I want to make sure I'm confident about what I'm saying, so we don't get caught in a lie later on. We've got all our bases covered on this? We're completely innocent and have the proof to back it up?”

“Yes, Dave,” Francesca reassured him with a sigh and a nod. “Just tell it as it is. Full transparency, nothing to hide. Finance will give you a rundown of what they have so far. We'll get the complete picture when we have everything in order, but based on what we've seen so far, we'll have no trouble proving it's all bogus.”



“Gotcha,” he replied, making notes on his pad. “So what are we thinking for a statement?”

The PR department took over from there, with Evelyn, David, and a few other advisors throwing ideas back and forth. Meanwhile, Juliet handed Francesca a stack of memos, bullet points, and other documents to look over while the meeting continued. A cup of coffee was pushed in her direction, along with a Danish pastry from the basket in the corner. This was going to be a long day.

At nine o'clock, as they had been warned, Claire's story hit the news. Her appearance had a profound impact. Claire's reputation for honesty and integrity was flawless, and she came across as an earnest, sincere, sympathetic witness to Francesca's supposed misdeeds. The network presenters made sure to highlight all the salacious details in just the right way, making it seem as though the former employee had been brave enough to step forward because she feared for her life.

By that point, Evelyn and David were ready with social media statements refuting the claims and ensuring that a full report would be forthcoming by the end of the week. The legal department was still hotly debating whether to sue for libel—which it clearly was—or if that would be bad for PR at this delicate stage of the game. Several current campaign staffers were scheduled for televised interviews throughout the week to debunk Claire's testimonial and clear Francesca's name. Everything was in hand and ready to launch. Hopefully, it wouldn't be too little, too late.

As the day unfolded around her, with an immediate onslaught of outrage-inducing headlines and social media hate against the campaign, Francesca felt increasingly helpless and exhausted. She knew, as did her staff, that everything was in the clear. That the allegations were baseless and absurd, and that their case was rock solid. Still, that wasn't much comfort against the relentless barrage of lies that dominated the news cycle.

To the casual observer, the news seemed to be painting an indisputable picture. Claire, accompanied by countless 'anonymous sources' and unnamed former colleagues, painted a damning portrait of a corrupt, power-hungry candidate who used campaign funds and who only served herself, despite her proclaimed ideals of fairness and social justice. Francesca had been reduced to a shadowy figure, a deceptive demon, a cunning manipulator. A con artist who hid behind a façade of sincerity.

Naturally, Margot's people were quick to lend support for the attack. Immediately, an official statement from Margot's campaign appeared in support of the claims, expressing shock and disappointment at Francesca's moral corruption. Margot even had the audacity to go on national television and say, "We cannot allow such dishonesty and hypocrisy to shape our society. The American people deserve a leader who has nothing to hide."

If it weren't so infuriating, it would be laughable, Francesca thought. Nothing to hide? Really, Margot? That was rich, coming from a closeted, married gay woman with a web of conspiracy around her and a trail of ruined careers in her wake.

What about how much you like going down on women, Margot?

The woman was a menace, a danger to the world, and yet she was out there with a straight face, telling the country that she represented honesty and trust. All with a perfectly straight face, looking serene and angelic in her pearls and white blazer on screen while lying through her teeth.

Meanwhile, Margot's poll numbers started ticking steadily upward all day as the press ran wild with this new revelation. It was a predictable effect, but concerning nonetheless. The media latched on to the scandal with gusto, milking it for all it was worth, piling on as many shocking twists and turns as they could come up with to keep ratings high.

Somehow, by the second morning, there were discussions of her campaign's ties to organized crime, offshore shell corporations in the Cayman Islands, and FBI investigations into a massive conspiracy. It was all sensationalist nonsense, but that didn't stop the rumor mill from spinning at maximum velocity, tearing apart anything Francesca stood for with an insatiable hunger.

After three days, everyone was dead tired. Francesca, her team, and the various lawyers and consultants supporting them had barely slept or eaten, camping out in campaign headquarters and living off of coffee and takeout Chinese food. Every attempt at clearing Francesca's name had been brushed off as a distraction tactic or outright ignored by a media sphere completely blinded by their lust for drama. Social media feeds were saturated by vicious attacks and vile tirades, directed by bot armies or by anonymous cowards too spineless to own their words. The overall sentiment on the ground was becoming increasingly ugly and dangerous, and the most recent poll numbers showed a distressing downtick in support for her campaign among middle-aged white voters. It looked very bleak.

Throughout every political fire Francesca had faced, however, she could always count on the unbridled support of her family. The Thurstons were a closely-knit clan who had dedicated their lives to public service and philanthropy. Like always, they rallied around Francesca, sending reassuring emails and text messages, defending her to any reporter who dared approach them, and lending her emotional and logistical support whenever needed.

What Francesca needed right now was exactly that kind of respite from the madness. As her car rolled up to a red-painted farmhouse just outside Boston, she already felt herself breathe a little easier. The old wooden house was surrounded by sprawling fields and green forests, with rolling hills in the distance. Sunlight streamed down, bringing with it a peaceful feeling of calm and tranquility.

Her grandparents' home had always been a sanctuary. Her grandmother had passed

several years ago from Alzheimer's, but her grandfather, even at almost ninety, was still as healthy, sharp, and lively as ever. Frank Thurston, in addition to being a loving grandparent who was always ready to lend an ear, was a legendary political figure who had inspired his granddaughter to pursue her dreams in politics. Throughout a long and arduous career in the Senate, he had held firm to his ideals in the face of countless controversies, threats, and betrayals. He was considered one of the greatest lawmakers of his generation, as well as one of the most influential African-American public figures of the past century. Francesca often came here for advice whenever her path seemed unclear.

She joined her grandfather in the study, where he liked to sit with a cup of tea, looking out over the acres of land that made up the property. He was a thin, weathered man with stark white hair, his skin lined and sagging from age, but his deep brown eyes were as bright and intelligent as ever. Upon hearing her voice calling out in greeting from the hallway, he put aside his book and smiled warmly, gesturing for her to join him.

“There you are, my girl,” he beckoned in his raspy, crackling baritone. “Come in, my dear.”

As soon as she reached him, he opened his arms welcomingly. She sank into his embrace, feeling some of the tension drain out of her body as he stroked her hair with one liver-spotted hand. His comforting presence alone brought a sense of peace that she'd sorely missed over the past couple of days. Francesca let out a long, weary sigh, falling heavily onto the floral cushions and reaching for a pot of herbal tea on the table.

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“You really need to stop that, Grandpa,” she said affectionately, gesturing to the tobacco-filled pipe perched between his lips. “Those things are going to kill you one day.”

“Let an old man enjoy the little pleasures left in life,” he scolded gently, patting her arm with an indulgent grin. “Come now, child. You look exhausted. I’ve seen the headlines these last few days. Always someone out to cut us down in this line of work, no?”

“Yeah, unfortunately,” she sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “I wish this campaign didn’t involve such a deep vein of nastiness. Why can’t politics ever be about ideals and principles anymore? I feel like I’m wading through a swamp half the time, dodging landmines and toxic sludge. Sometimes I wonder why I keep doing this.”

“Because it is about ideals and principles, Frankie,” her grandfather said firmly, clasping both her hands in his with an encouraging smile. “At least for some of us. Always was for me, just like it is for you. That’s why we endure the slime of politics. Because if people like us give up, the only ones left will be the crooks and the charlatans. The world needs people who believe in something greater than themselves to change things.”

“Sometimes it’s really hard to see the big picture with all this,” she admitted quietly, running a hand over her tired eyes. “Every time I get knocked off course and pulled off track by some random scandal or a nasty rumor, it feels like maybe I should just accept it and get out while I can.”

“Oh no,” he shook his head, raising a wrinkled finger. “Don't let them do that to you, kid. Don't you give up on the world, Francesca, and don't let the world give up on you either. Some years it seems like we're marching backward, but humanity is ultimately moving forward toward a better future. You can't lose sight of that bigger vision. We're on a journey, and we need to be the ones paving the way. Now more than ever.”

Even though his voice wasn't nearly as firm and booming as it had been when Francesca was a child, there was still a passion and gravitas in every word that was captivating. When she looked at her grandfather, a sense of purpose seemed to radiate from his worn, weathered body. He had spent his whole life fighting for justice and equality, despite countless setbacks, heartbreaking losses, and crushing disappointments. Through it all, he had never lost that fierce flame inside that burned for what was right. As Francesca watched her grandfather gaze out thoughtfully at the green fields and clear blue sky with that same defiant fire in his eyes, she felt her own strength start to return to her. She drew herself up straighter, pulling her shoulders back and taking a deep, cleansing breath.

“Thanks for reminding me of that, Grandpa,” Francesca told him earnestly, leaning forward to rest a grateful hand on his frail wrist. “I'm lucky to have you on my side.”

He reached forward and squeezed her cheek playfully, smiling with tender amusement in his eyes. “Now, tell me what has gotten into this damn election this year. What's this business about those bogus rumors? Those are ridiculous accusations!” he said.

For the next hour, they chatted comfortably about the election and the developing scandal. He expressed frustration at seeing someone with promise beset by such adversity, but maintained his unflinching faith that Francesca would rise above this mess. Over lunch, she continued to vent her frustrations at the entire fiasco and the futility of it all, complaining about the duplicitous and deceitful nature of the wolf in

sheep's clothing that was Margot Smith.

It was liberating to get all this venom out of her system and onto the table. With each passing moment, she felt lighter and happier. By the time she returned to her waiting vehicle, she was brimming with energy and motivation, rejuvenated by a chance to refocus herself. She had stood in storms and faced down lies and slander before, and so had countless good, honest men and women before her. This was just a bump in the road. Margot might be ruthless, but there was no substance in the false accusations being thrown around. They couldn't hold water for long.

In truth, as she sat in the car, Francesca found herself almost feeling sorry for her opponent. At the heart of all the deception and manipulation, the woman had become a victim of her own orchestrations. Margot was trapped in the golden cage she had built for herself, forced to destroy both others and her true self in pursuit of success and power. It was a damn shame, really, that such a brilliant and beautiful woman had sacrificed everything truly valuable on the altar of ambition.

In another life, maybe, they could have made one hell of a team. Maybe even something else entirely. It was a stupid thought, Francesca knew, but there had been a moment in both the elevator and that hotel room when Margot had been vulnerable and raw. Real. For just a little while, her perfect mask had slipped off, revealing a beating heart beneath that intrigued Francesca more than she liked to admit. A fascinating, complicated human being that she might have liked to explore deeper.

Maybe. In another life. Right now, Francesca had a battle to win.

10

MARGOT

Everything was going exactly according to plan. By now, every mainstream news

outlet in the country was covering the story with zealous enthusiasm. Rumors and theories flew back and forth at a rapid-fire rate, spreading through social media at the speed of light. A frenzied mob had been stirred up into a feverish frenzy of emotion. The populace was incensed at the very idea of their beloved candidate stealing campaign donations. It was scandalous, shameless, and unforgivable.

It should have felt good. It was a victory, after all--precisely what Margot had intended. Yet, as she stood in the dressing room and looked at herself in the mirror, the sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach refused to leave. This felt hollow, somehow. Unsatisfying. Like a heavy weight was dragging her down, pressing the oxygen out of her lungs. Margot tugged at the collar of her blouse, trying to loosen it. Her perfectly fitted designer suit suddenly felt constricting. What was happening to her? What was wrong?

Had she ever experienced it before, she likely would have recognized the feeling as guilt. A lifetime of unchecked ambition had shaped Margot into a creature whose prime instincts were for survival and dominance. Like any beast acting on impulse, feelings such as remorse and shame were foreign to her. This unfamiliar sensation was therefore deeply disconcerting. It made Margot angry and irrational. It made her want to break something. Destroy it. Wreck it like it had wrecked her.

Fortunately, the rally presented the perfect outlet for her overwhelming fury. Even before Margot began speaking, the rowdy crowd of enthusiastic supporters had been whipped into a raucous, furious mass of outrage at their enemies. A sea of red filled the cavernous sports arena, with giant flags draped around and rows upon rows of cheering supporters, clapping vigorously as the music played.

Her arrival was met by a thunderous roar of applause. The crowd rose to their feet, a flurry of sound and energy crashing into her as she swept through the throngs. Margot drank it all in greedily, soaking up every drop of validation and admiration. Yes. It was all worth it for this. The pain, the sacrifice, the struggle, all the suffering--all for



moments like this. Soon they would be victorious, and she could start to make a real difference in the world, leading millions to a brighter tomorrow. Everything else was a temporary distraction. A tiny hiccup in her trajectory to the top.

Margot marched onto the stage with purpose in her strides, waving and smiling at the crowd. Their response was deafening, drowning out the orchestra music with their roaring cheers. Cameras flashed and lights flickered, creating an electrifying atmosphere. Her pulse raced as adrenaline pumped through her body, making her feel invincible once more. These people loved her. They believed in her. Margot's success meant the world to them. How could anything possibly be wrong with the world, when they could make such miracles happen?

As she approached the microphone, her smile broadened into a genuine expression of warmth. Margot was energized, thrilled, and overflowing with exhilaration as she started to address her supporters.

“Georgia, I'm so happy to be here with you today,” she announced in ringing tones, wrapping her hands around either side of the podium. “This beautiful state has always had a special place in my heart, ever since I was little girl and spent summers with my grandparents in Atlanta.”

Her southern twang was a little stronger tonight than usual. Just for effect, to help establish a connection to her audience. As she spoke, she transported them back to those warm childhood summers, watching her grandfather tilling his garden, sewing seeds in rich soil. This was a tale of small-town folks, honest, salt-of-the-earth folks growing up and working hard to achieve their dreams. A narrative of humble beginnings and simple values that resonated with the everyday American family. Just a small-town southern girl, full of hopes and ambitions, now on the doorstep of history.

And if she could do it, was the message, so could their children—unless corrupt

elitists took away their freedom to aspire and thrive.

“Now, I hear y'all about all this sordid business with Senator Thurston,” she drawled out, her tone dropping slightly in sympathy and concern, but with a mischievous glint in her eyes.

The mention of the name was immediately met with an outcry of boos and angry shouts, which Margot allowed to simmer for a beat or two before silencing the noise with a wave of her hand.

“Listen, I know y'all are mighty riled up about all this. So am I. Here we've got a senator who talks about integrity, equality, fairness, community. About putting people ahead of politics and getting done what's right,” Margot continued in a mocking drawl, throwing her hands out in exasperation and earning a laugh from the audience. “My friends, I don't want to stand here and fuel hearsay and speculation, but we all have questions, and rightfully so. How can the people of America trust a woman like that to uphold our highest values, to not abuse her power to line her own pockets, when her campaign finances are rife with misdeeds?”

Another uproar from Margot's fans, even louder than the first, erupting all around the stadium. There was a savage glee to the howls, a feral edge to their rabid intensity as they echoed off the walls, bouncing wildly around the space.

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Inside her, the heavy lump made its reappearance. A flicker of uneasiness surfaced as Margot gazed out over the sea of people. For a brief, bewildering moment, a shiver crept down her spine. Her words were having exactly the effect she had anticipated, but for some reason, that didn't bring her the joy and gratification she craved. This time, the adulation didn't wash over Margot and fill her up until she overflowed. Instead, something about the experience left her feeling cold and nauseated.

But Margot's smile never wavered and her posture didn't falter. Not for a moment. She pushed the feeling down, just like she always did. Tucking it away, burying it beneath layers of carefully honed indifference. That was not for her to dwell on. Feelings didn't matter, only results.

“The fine, hard-working people of this great nation deserve a leader they can trust,” she went on forcefully, a note of steel in her voice as she squared her jaw. “They deserve a leader who is honest, honorable, and accountable for her actions. They deserve to be confident that their tax dollars and contributions will support the progress of this country, rather than lining the pockets of crooked politicians. Americans deserve a government that is just, efficient, and fair. Will you vote for a Washington elite who puts your money in her back pocket? Or for someone who has devoted her life to serving this country and making real change?”

Another round of jubilant applause erupted throughout the venue. Whistles and hoots and shouts of approval. Cheers and cries of support. The rhythmic pounding of fists on the tables, stamping in time with the thump of blood rushing in Margot's ears. The faces around her were aglow with excitement and triumph, drinking in her rhetoric like a cold drink of water in the desert heat. It was glorious.

It should have felt glorious.

Her speech went on for nearly forty-five minutes. The energy was palpable--the crowd entranced and utterly spellbound. They hung on her every word, following along in their printed programs and rising to their feet at key points as if moved by some unseen puppet master. Throughout it all, the blonde in white at the podium felt somehow disconnected from it all, her voice coming out like a recording from somewhere far away, speaking words she had recited a hundred times before. Inside, there was only a hollow void that now seemed to consume her.

Even as Margot shook hands with donors, took photos with her husband, and chatted with allies in the lobby afterward, there was an invisible barrier surrounding her. Keeping her separate from everyone else, sealing her off from the world. Margot's body and voice acted on autopilot, maintaining a role she had perfected so thoroughly that it no longer required conscious input from her brain. Her mind remained elsewhere, wondering why everything suddenly felt so off-kilter.

One thought kept replaying in Margot's mind. That moment in the elevator with Francesca, when it felt like the walls were closing in and the air was getting thicker by the second. There was nowhere she could escape. Nowhere to run, nothing to distract herself with. Those deep brown eyes, shining with warmth and honesty, looking right at her, seeing her with understanding and empathy, while she had asked Margot a simple question: "Is it really all a game to you?"

Was it? Was any of this actually real to her? Had Margot ever asked herself that in the thirty years since she had graduated from college and become a ruthless politician who acted without a shred of hesitation? Behind her was a mountain of lies, people she had betrayed and manipulated, careers she had crushed in the blink of an eye. All in the name of winning the ultimate prize. And once she did win, there would be more lies. Margot would sit there on her throne and reign, implementing all these promises she had made in the name of winning votes.

Why was she doing this? What did she believe in? Herself, of course. Some of the promises she had made. Not all of them, though. Fewer and fewer as the years went by. Once you started bending your beliefs for personal gain, it became easier to do it again. If Margot really thought about it, what still remained of her original mission? What would the young woman who had first stepped into Congress all those years ago think about who she was today? About what she had done to get to where she was?

These thoughts took hold and festered all the way back to the hotel, where Margot sat alone in her suite and stared out the window at the bright lights of the city, slowly sipping her wine. She and William had parted ways for the evening, as they always did when there was no one around to play the happy couple for. He was likely on the phone with Tom, making plans for what they would do once the election was over. When they had achieved their goals. When they succeeded and retired back into private life, after two terms—hopefully—in the White House. When this sham of a marriage was no longer necessary.

It had never bothered Margot that the closest thing she had ever had to a partner was someone she did not and could not have any kind of romantic feelings for, nor he for her. It was a mutually convenient arrangement that served them both well. They were friends, mostly. It worked. Now, though, for the first time, Margot found herself contemplating what would come next. Her ambitions had led her here, but she had never really sat down to consider what she would do when it was all over. When there was no use for such a strategic partnership anymore. What would she find then?

When it was all over, who would she be, and who would be there to greet her?

Frustrated and restless, Margot turned on the TV hanging on the wall in time for the evening news. Unsurprisingly, they covered her rally, showcasing the highlights from the event. Virtually every clip featured her delivering an impassioned speech or greeting supporters warmly. Margot stared at her own face, bright, smiling and

confident, looking to the world like a shining beacon of morality and wisdom. Perfect, poised, powerful. Untouchable. An ideal worthy of emulation. A stranger.

The footage moved on to a speech her opponent had given at a university campus earlier that day. The camera zoomed in on her speaking passionately about higher education and student debt. The exact words weren't all that impressive or groundbreaking. The children are the future, the torch is being passed, the potential you possess, and so on and so forth. It wasn't even that different from what Margot had said in similar speeches throughout the years.

Still, something about the way Francesca spoke captivated her audience. She wasn't just going through the motions, spouting rehearsed platitudes. There was a vitality there, a fervent belief in those lofty ideals shining out in every gesture, glance, and lilt in her voice. Francesca's body language was relaxed and seemed unrehearsed, flowing naturally without the artificial tension of trying too hard.

Her delivery was fluid. Not perfect, but charmingly human. There were spontaneous anecdotes that got laughter and unexpected detours that pulled the crowd in with curiosity. All the while, those beautiful brown eyes sparkled with life. Faith. Hope. A kind of awe at the limitlessness of youth and possibility. It wasn't some polished, expertly crafted performance designed to win over as many viewers as possible and deliver the largest bang for the candidate's advertising dollar. It felt honest.

Not for the first time, Margot leaned back and watched her opponent intently. This time, though, it wasn't with the intention of uncovering cracks in the foundation or searching for weaknesses to exploit. Instead, she let herself get swept away the way she imagined other people watching Francesca did, allowing herself to experience fully what she saw before her. Something stirred in Margot's cold, diamond-encased heart, bringing with it a prickle of discomfort.

A flood of repressed emotions crashed over her all at once. The one that stood out

was longing. A desperate, almost painful yearning for the fire and courage the younger woman had in her bones. For the freedom to feel that fiercely, to care that deeply about something she truly believed in. If they had met in college, when Margot still let herself occasionally go wild and take chances, she would have gravitated toward Francesca's energy like a moth to a flame. Just like she had in that elevator. Only back then, Margot might not have extinguished the spark that threatened to turn into a forest fire.

Back then, she might have let it burn.

That thought filled Margot with another kind of longing. A much more primal, less refined and sophisticated need. For several long moments, she could see nothing but a pair of dark, smoldering eyes. Margot leaned her head back as she listened to Francesca's warm, powerful voice over the speakers, remembering the soft touch of full lips against her own.

Margot's hips tensed under a phantom touch, followed by a sharp intake of breath as her skin rippled with goosebumps. She let out a low moan, arching her back as her hand slipped beneath her expensive trousers and began to stroke her now pulsating clitoris. With a steady, practiced rhythm, she increased the tempo as she gave herself permission to slip away for a short time into forbidden territory.

Oh, God. What a relief to have those thoughts released from their prison. In her mind's eye, she saw Francesca's firm, muscled body, naked and glistening with sweat as Francesca lay on top of her, touching, kissing, caressing her. She pictured them again in the throes of passion, their bodies intertwined and tangled in a passionate embrace. The voice on the TV melded with the memory of moans and gasps.

Margot bit her lip as her fingers quickened their pace. As her own cries joined those of her fantasy lover, she threw her head back and let all control fall away. Her other hand roamed up under her blouse, pinching her nipple as her whole body trembled

and shivered with desire. With her heart racing and her pulse pounding in her ears, a familiar ecstasy built rapidly inside of her, mounting as she chased the wave to the climax she needed so desperately.

It came over her like a tidal wave, crashing into her with tremendous force. Margot's eyes rolled back in her head as her body tensed and convulsed in a sudden, explosive release. A whimpering gasp escaped her lips and for one brief moment, the pain lifted, and everything was right in the world. Euphoria flooded her senses, wiping out everything else as the rush coursed through her veins. Her mind was blank, lost in the momentary euphoria of the orgasm, and at that moment, she was free.

Then, far more quickly than she would have liked, it was over. Reality crashed down on her in full force. Once again, she was alone in a dark hotel room, flushed and sticky, staring at some pundit on the news being interviewed about her poll numbers. Nothing had changed. Nothing was better. If anything, it was worse. Shame burned Margot's cheeks and self-loathing stirred within her. She swallowed hard and pushed herself up off the couch, physically shaking it off.

God, that woman was going to be the death of her. She'd spent most of her adult life blocking out such dangerous thoughts and desires, building thick, impenetrable walls around them and reinforcing the walls with concrete and steel to keep her desires buried forever. One look, one accidental brush against those boundaries, and one stupid, reckless action, and now Margot was acting like a pathetic, horny schoolgirl. Disgusting.

Sneering to herself, Margot tossed back the rest of her drink and made a beeline for the shower. She had to shake this off. Whatever bizarre doubt was currently festering inside needed to be exorcised and eradicated. This was a war, and Margot fought to win.



FRANCESCA

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

The rumors were slowly starting to fade away, but damage had been done. While the topic hadn't been entirely extinguished from the national discourse yet, by the end of the second week of the political hellscape, Francesca's camp had released their financial report. Which meant that every sane and reasonable media outlet had been forced to accept the truth of the situation. Countless think pieces and apologetic coverage ran, debunking the false scandal and calling attention to the real problems.

Conservative media outlets were still fanning the flames, though, insisting that there had been some kind of cover-up. The documents were fake, according to them, and there was simply too much smoke to ignore. Sure, the evidence looked irrefutable, but was it really? Hadn't Claire just seemed so genuine when she testified against Francesca's character? Why would such a respectable former employee lie about something as serious as embezzlement? This must be a witch hunt perpetrated by progressive media bias, trying to gaslight innocent American citizens into thinking lies were truth. They wouldn't fool anyone.

Unfortunately, such blatant falsehoods continued to attract an alarmingly large audience. For the most part, though, equilibrium had been restored through a series of compelling public appearances, carefully crafted statements, and, of course, actual reality. No amount of wishful thinking on the opposition's part could erase the evidence of Francesca's innocence and her track record for integrity. Their poll numbers were up again, albeit not yet quite as high as before. Still, it was a promising sign, and morale was on the rise in their headquarters.

Francesca herself was exhausted. Running a presidential campaign was like running several start-up companies simultaneously, while trying to keep your ship afloat in the middle of a storm that refused to quit. The next debate was two weeks away, and

after that, it was only a month until November 5th, election day. As tiring as the race had been so far, the next few weeks would be even more grueling as everything started hurtling towards the finish line.

This morning, Francesca was in the capital, attending a luncheon at the White House to celebrate women in tech innovation. It was a chance for a quick publicity bump with a sympathetic audience, especially important after the recent scandal that could have marred her reputation as an advocate for advancement and diversity. Of course, it was just as much of an opportunity for Margot, who would be present, along with many other notable female leaders from across the country.

Francesca was determined not to let her opponent get under her skin, though. She had decided put all that behind her and to focus on the issues that mattered. They would shake hands, pose for a photo or two, and make a big show of being amicable and respectful--despite everything that had transpired.

Her team had agreed that the best course of action was to take the high road. As much as a part of her wanted to yell at the top of her lungs that Margot had been behind this whole debacle, that would only stoke the flames and give her opponents more ammunition for their conspiracy theories and mud-slinging. Francesca's greatest strengths were her warmth, compassion, and integrity. She didn't want to be the kind of politician who stooped to the level of her detractors. People had to elect Francesca based on what she actually stood for, not because they couldn't stand her enemies.

As soon as she stepped out into the famous rose garden in her navy pantsuit and sensible black leather pumps and saw Margot's lithe and beautiful figure on the other side, however, she felt her commitment to peace begin to waver. The golden-haired viper was already there with her husband, chatting with President Ward and his wife. Margot's hair flowed gracefully over one shoulder in waves of perfectly coiffed highlighted perfection, not a strand out of place, and she wore a light blue long-sleeved cocktail dress. Delicate pearls hung around Margot's slender neck. How

could someone with so little humanity look so angelic?

Forcing herself to keep her expression pleasant, Francesca made her way across the lawn to greet them. A camera team was circling around like vultures, trying to get the perfect shot for the evening news later that night. A handful of journalists lurked nearby, ready to catch any words that might make it past their lips for some sound bites they could spin into interesting tidbits for viewers at home. This was the first time they would be seen in the same place since the “scandal” broke out, after all. The press was probably hoping for a bloodbath. A full-fledged catfight right there on the immaculately manicured green grass.

Honestly, the closer Francesca got, the more appealing that prospect sounded. A part of her wanted to wrap her hands around that elegant neck. To throw Margot on the ground like they were rival lionesses in the savannah, ripping and tearing at each other like wild beasts until their clothes were torn and their limbs entangled, their faces inches from each other, and—okay, that took a turn. Get it together, Frankie, she chastised herself, feeling the heat creep up her cheeks. What is wrong with you? Stop drooling. Stay focused.

When Francesca finally reached them, the president and first lady greeted her warmly and shook her hand. They exchanged pleasant greetings before moving on to greet the next guest. This left Francesca and Margot a foot apart, staring at each other. Well, and William, but bless his heart, the man always seemed like an obedient labrador retriever. An extension of Margot, so not a threat in his own right, and certainly not relevant when those piercing, sky-blue eyes were locked on her.

“So good to see you, Francesca,” Margot greeted cheerfully, with a flawlessly cordial smile plastered on her face. “How have you been? These last few weeks must have been really difficult for you, what with all the scrutiny over those allegations. I was so relieved to learn the truth.”

In that moment, if looks could kill, Margot Smith would have collapsed onto the ground, stone-cold dead, on the spot. The sheer audacity. All Southern charm and honeyed words, as if she and her entire team hadn't been out here spewing enough filth to drown a hippo over the last week and a half, over baseless slander they themselves had concocted. No remorse, not a hint of shame. And that smug smile—the woman was practically laughing at her from behind those crystal blue eyes.

“I have the truth on my side, Margot,” Francesca replied smoothly, matching her opponent's perfected social nicety with one of her own. “And an impeccable record of integrity over nearly two decades of service to my fellow Americans. I trust the voters to see that.”

The air between them felt charged, like the split second before a lightning strike. From the outside, though, nothing about their exchange suggested any tension or conflict whatsoever. On the contrary, their smiles appeared as friendly as any with other conversation partners. They shook hands and smiled for the cameras with perfectly choreographed body language. The images would communicate that while they might be political opponents, they were also both professional, composed, and civilized individuals who respected the process. A textbook example of the way elections ought to be. The way politics should be.

When they finally broke apart, turning and heading off in separate directions, they parted like old friends who had shared an affectionate farewell rather than bitter rivals who had clashed heatedly over months of intense strife. Outwardly, the whole encounter had gone so smoothly that one could have blinked and missed it.

That's what everyone watching would see, anyway. In reality, Francesca's palms were sweating and it was a struggle to breathe normally. Margot Smith had a physical effect on her. And way more since that night in the hotel when Francesca had eagerly submitted to her sexually. Now, both fury and passion raged, a confusing cocktail of

emotions that she really couldn't afford to let derail her. Margot Smith drove her absolutely crazy.

Throughout the president's brief address and speeches from some of the honored guests, Francesca stole frequent glances across the lawn. More frequently than she'd care to admit. Each time, she caught a pair of opalescent eyes boring back into hers, meeting her gaze as if drawn to it with magnetic precision. Neither of them looked away immediately when they were caught staring. Instead, a silent game ensued as they held eye contact, testing each other's will to look away first. Usually, it was the sound of applause that pulled both of them back to reality, forcing them to look present and engaged again.

Afterward, the candidates posed with various members of staff, local officials, and representatives from the business world for a myriad of photos. Juliet expertly guided Francesca back and forth, seamlessly weaving her into every cluster and pairing her up with as many important people as possible for maximum exposure. To her right, Margot floated across the lawn beside her equally pristine husband, doing the same thing. Every now and then, they caught each other's eyes, sending little shivers down Francesca's spine. It unnerved her every time.

Finally, as the event wound down and they all headed back inside, Francesca stepped into one of the bathrooms to gather herself. She was surprised to find the familiar tall, lean, elegant figure leaning casually against the sink with her arms crossed, staring intently at her phone. Margot didn't seem to notice her immediately, clearly preoccupied with whatever she was reading. An expression Francesca couldn't recall seeing very often had replaced Margot's usual mask of confidence. Instead, she had a furrowed brow and pursed lips.

For a moment, Francesca just stood and studied her, trying to understand. It was a strange sight. She rarely saw Margot caught off guard or off balance, without that unflappable poise she maintained at all times. Margot looked almost frightened.

Vulnerable, like whatever was on that screen had rattled her deeply. It was fascinating to behold. Francesca couldn't help but find it endearing. The behavior shouldn't be, but it was. Some of the seething anger from earlier dissipated, replaced by a strange yearning to reach out and touch Margot. Reassure her. Take care of her.

The door clicked shut behind them. Margot's head snapped up as their gazes locked once more. Immediately, her mask fell back into place, haughty confidence and casual indifference replacing any sign of vulnerability. The air between them turned to ice and feelings of warmth or softness vanished. The women glared at each other, each silently challenging the other to act on the simmering aggression threatening to boil over.

“Francesca,” Margot greeted coolly.

“Margot,” Francesca answered tersely in response.

Silence stretched between them. Neither spoke for several long moments as they sized the other up. They were alone now. There were no cameras to smile for, no crowds to please, and no audiences to perform for. Alone with each other for the first time since that unforgettable, regrettable night in Chicago. For once, they could drop the charade and unleash their true emotions.

“What the hell was that about?” Francesca demanded furiously, taking a step forward. “Did you really think you could bury me like you did Bennett? That I'd go down so easily?”

“If you're going to accuse me, darling, at least have some real proof,” Margot shot back dismissively, brushing an imaginary speck off her sleeve. “As I recall, it was your own former staffer who instigated the entire debacle. Watch your own side of the street before you start pointing fingers, sweetheart.”

“Oh, don't even start with that,” Francesca hissed, glaring daggers at Margot’s devilishly angelic face. “This has your filthy paws all over it. I had hoped that you and I could show each other a modicum of respect and at least let the best woman win, but I suppose I should have known you couldn't handle a fair fight. I thought you were better than this, Margot. Shame on me for believing you had a single shred of integrity.”

For the briefest flicker of a second, something in the older woman’s eyes faltered, revealing a flash of insecurity and pain. Just as rapidly, it was gone, replaced with the perfected icy indifference. It was so quick that it might have been dismissed as a trick of the light, but Francesca was sure of what she'd seen. There was a tiny crack in Margot's otherwise polished surface. Just as she'd suspected in Chicago. Underneath the cool facade, there was a beating heart. She'd struck a nerve.

“Let's not act like idealistic schoolgirls,” Margot retorted sharply, sneering in disdain. “Your team should have been prepared for someone to attack you that way, but you were left scrambling for days while these allegations flourished. Do you really think, after that mess, that you're in any way prepared to serve as president? Do you think everyone's going to suddenly play nice with you once you're in the Oval Office? This isn't even close to the kind of brutality you'd face if you were ever elected, and you're already exhausted. You aren't cut out for this.”



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

The words were venomous, lashing out with merciless force. Beneath them, though, Francesca sensed uncertainty and fear, just as she had before. She took another step forward, and Margot stepped up to meet her, not letting herself be intimidated. Now, they were mere inches apart, close enough that the scent of Margot's vanilla perfume filled the space between them. A tingle spread through Francesca's body, heat rising in her belly.

Desire flooded between her legs.

"I think you're projecting, Margot," she whispered in challenge. "Your mountain of lies is crumbling beneath you and you're terrified that the whole world is going to see that you're nothing but a fraud. You want to beat me with this kind of nonsense because you know you can't beat me fairly. My integrity rattles you because you lack it yourself. What do you believe in, Margot? Beneath all the glitter and glitz and diamonds, who are you?"

She watched, mesmerized, as something flickered in the crystalline pools of blue staring back at her. In that instant, time froze. Nonexistent walls dropped between the women and the electricity crackling in the air intensified. Margot swallowed hard, and Francesca could almost see her breath hitching. Her own pulse quickened and her knees became weak. A delicious tension filled the space.

Then, without warning, Margot's hand wrapped itself around the back of Francesca's head, pulling her into a bruising kiss. Francesca responded instinctively, pushing Margot against the counter behind her as their mouths collided. She returned the kiss hungrily, driven by pure animalistic instinct, her tongue slipping between those sweet, pink lips and exploring her mouth eagerly. Desperately.

Her hands lifted Margot's dress and found the back of her thighs, lifting her up as she automatically wrapped her legs tightly around Francesca's waist with her ass on the washbasin. God, those legs. Long and toned, with smooth, supple skin that felt like silk to the touch. Her body fit perfectly against Francesca's, nestled in her secure grasp. Margot kept one hand tangled in her hair while the other squeezed down between them, grappling urgently at the waistband of Francesca's pants. A low moan escaped Francesca's mouth as Margot slipped her hand beneath the fabric, past her underwear, and stroked her clit, working her magic once again.

Their lips parted briefly as the two women gasped for breath. Their eyes met again, both sets burning with fierce desire, neither willing to look away first. Determined not to surrender so easily this time, Francesca captured Margot's lower lip in her mouth, sucking on it before biting down lightly, earning a sharp intake of breath and a whimper from the woman pressed against her. God, that sound was heavenly.

One arm wrapped tightly around Margot's waist to support her, Francesca moved her other hand down and pushed up the fabric of Margot's tight dress further, digging her fingers into her upper thigh. Margot continued to massage Francesca's clit, applying pressure in all the right places. Francesca shuddered every time those long fingers applied a little more force, sending sparks of pleasure shooting through her body. All coherent thoughts and concerns were gone.

God, Francesca hated this woman and how good she was at making her come. She groaned in blissful agony as she felt the throbbing build as Margot slipped two fingers into her soaking pussy, her thumb continuing to draw circles on her clitoris in exactly the right rhythm.

"Not so tough now, are you, sweetheart?" Margot purred in her ear, sending a wave of arousal washing over her. "You really need to learn when to stop running that smart mouth of yours."

Francesca grabbed a fistful of Margot's perfect hair and tugged, yanking her head back and exposing the milky white skin of her throat. Margot let out a silvery, playful laugh, her fingers still thrusting wildly inside Francesca, showing no sign of ceasing the magnificent torment she was inflicting. Panting, Francesca bent her head to leave a trail of eager kisses and bites across Margot's throat. It was futile. Sexually, Margot had her. Again.

Francesca parted her legs further, allowing Margot the access she needed to fuck her properly and Margot hopped off the washbasin so her fingers could go to work.

Margot pushed Francesca back with her free hand and she staggered two steps before she was pinned against the pillar between the cubicle doors.

She was grateful for the support it gave her as Margot's seeking fingers found her G spot effortlessly and began to fuck her roughly.

Harder and faster. Harder and faster. Margot's thumb grazing persistently against Francesca's clitoris as she fucked her.

Francesca let her. She liked it. A lot.

Margot's fingers drove her crazy and she couldn't help but concede to them.

She heard her own moans ringing out in the small bathroom and she forgot everything else as Margot's body leaned into hers and Francesca lost herself in the sensation.

Margot's lips growled in her ear.

"Come for me, sweetheart. I like it so very much when you come so hard for me."

It was all too much. Francesca sank her teeth into the delicate skin of Margot's neck as she rode out her climax, letting out a cry that reverberated off the tiled walls of the lavish bathroom. Every muscle in her body seized up. The orgasm was electric, scorching every nerve as it tore through her, overwhelming all her senses. She could feel Margot's left hand in her hair, caressing her gently, as the fingers of her right hand slid out of Francesca finally and she ached at the loss of them.

Finally, spent and satiated, Francesca crumpled, breathing heavily. Her cheek rested on Margot's shoulder, where it seemed to fit perfectly. For several long seconds, they remained there, panting together. One of Margot's hands ran up and down Francesca's back soothingly. When she caught her breath, Francesca straightened slowly, reluctantly easing her arms away. She blinked, and the spell was broken.

Reality came rushing back into her world like a sudden bucket of cold water poured directly on her head. She looked at Margot, who pulled back from her, flushed and breathing heavily. There was a curious expression on her gorgeous face, a kind of expectant surprise, as if she were waiting for some response from Francesca. Francesca swallowed thickly, taking a step back as the reality of this moment sunk in.

Come for me, sweetheart. I like it so very much when you come so hard for me.

They had done it again. They had succumbed to this insanity once more. In a semi-public bathroom in the White House, where anyone could walk in at any moment. They could have been caught red-handed at any moment. Margot had spent the last two weeks actively slandering her good name and doing everything in her power to ruin her, and yet the first chance she got, Francesca had thrown all caution to the wind and surrendered to her impulses. This was a disaster.

“What, not even going to return the favor, darlin'?” Margot smirked slyly, arching a sculpted eyebrow in amusement. “That's not very gracious of you.”

“Unbelievable,” Francesca scoffed, shaking her head in disbelief. “Jesus Christ, Margot, this is ridiculous. We can't do this. I don't know what the hell I was thinking.”

As she spoke, her voice shaking, she brushed off her suit, smoothing out the wrinkles to try and conceal any signs of what had happened. Her mind was racing with anxiety and conflicting emotions. This was all getting to her. The stress, the tension, the exhaustion. She couldn't even bring herself to look at Margot until she heard the sound of the faucet as Margot straightened herself up and went to wash Francesca's climax from her hands.

When Francesca looked up, Margot turned and was staring fixedly at her, suddenly emotionless and unreadable once more. There was something in her eyes Francesca couldn't quite place. It almost looked like hurt.

“Right,” Margot said flatly, drying her hands, smoothing out her dress and hair, her eyes locked on Francesca's expression in the mirror. “Never happened, won't happen again. Right?”

“Right,” Francesca agreed, with perhaps more conviction than she actually felt. “Just a lapse in judgment. Tensions running high.”

Margot nodded, but didn't say anything else or meet Francesca's gaze again. She checked her appearance in the mirror, pulling out her lipstick and reapplying it carefully. Once she was satisfied, she stepped away from the sink, walking back toward the door in smooth, fluid strides, not so much as glancing back as she slipped out. The door slammed shut with a resounding click.

Francesca stood there in shock, gazing after her for several long seconds before letting out a long, slow breath she didn't realize she'd been holding. She closed her eyes and leaned against the counter, taking deep breaths to steady herself. A strange sensation rose in her chest. Gone was the anger, and even the furious, primal desire. Left in its place was a hollow, aching emptiness. In the silence that followed, she couldn't help feeling like she'd just let something slip out of her grasp.

12

### MARGOT

A month ago, if anyone had asked her, Margot would have confidently told them that she had it all under control. Anything and everything life threw at her, she could handle with ease and grace. But as Margot stepped into the town car that would take her back to her temporary residence in Arlington, she wasn't so sure anymore. Something had broken through the carefully constructed walls she had built in her mind, and now, they were unraveling piece by piece.

What had she expected, exactly, when she kissed Francesca Thurston again in the White House bathroom a week ago? She knew Francesca would capitulate to her sexually. It had been reckless and irresponsible, and she had known it in the moment. It hadn't been the same kind of crazed fervor that had come over her in Chicago. This time, it had been calculated. A choice. After all, she knew full well that Francesca had wanted her to do it, and a part of Margot had wanted it to happen again too.

The mysterious 'Cassandra' had sent another photo, demanding more money, and it was becoming exhausting. Margot couldn't quite explain it, but it was like a part of her almost wanted to get caught out for her lesbian past. Not because she thought she deserved to lose the election over it, necessarily, but because maybe someone finding out that she was gay could make this nightmare end. Margot felt like her entire life, not to mention her and identity, was collapsing all around her. The foundation beneath her feet was cracking and threatening to give way.

If they had been found in the bathroom, Margot's whole world would have crumbled around her, everything she had ever worked for—and maybe that would have been a relief. Because maybe, in that moment, she didn't know who Margot Smith was anymore outside of the carefully curated mask she'd crafted and worn like armor. Maybe she wanted someone else to decide what came next for her. Maybe she wanted to fall, and for someone to catch her.

Good Lord. What madness. The second debate was days away and Margot needed to get her head back in the game. These fleeting moments of self-reflection were completely pointless. They kept happening, though, despite her best attempts to remain focused. The second she had a moment to herself, her thoughts spiraled back down this rabbit hole to nowhere. Wondering again who she was and why she was doing this.

Francesca had gotten into her head with all that talk of truth and what she believed in. Francesca had gotten into her head with a lot of things. How nice it seemed, to live

that way, embracing who she was and taking every opportunity to stand up for what she believed in, rather than constantly hiding and compromising every little part of herself to conform to an image of perfection. Or what one imagined perfection to look like. Margot knew well that there was no such thing. Francesca somehow had all those genuine smiles that warmed the hearts of all who laid eyes upon them. How nice it must be, to be surrounded by people she genuinely liked, respected, and cared about, not just people who were useful and had something to offer. Real friends. A family she could actually talk to and lean on.

“Mrs. Smith?”

The driver's voice interrupted her train of thought. She turned around from the passenger seat, meeting the eyes of the chauffeur.

“We've arrived, ma'am,” he clarified. “Would you like assistance with your luggage?”

She glanced out the window at the modest, yet tasteful two-story colonial-style house in front of her, momentarily lost in thought again.

“Yes. Thank you,” she replied robotically.

Margot slid across the seat toward the open door and stepped out onto the sidewalk, then climbed slowly up the driveway toward the entrance. The man from the car pulled out her suitcases and rolled them up beside her, while a security guard unlocked the door and let her inside. Glancing around at the finely decorated surroundings, it was like Margot was looking at them for the first time. Squeaky clean and shiny. Sleek and modern. Designed to impress visitors. Just like her apartment in D.C. and their mansion in Rooke. Meticulously tailored to ensure every detail reflected her impeccable reputation and standing within the community. Not a trace of individuality or personality to be found.



William sat at the dining table by the window, reading something on his laptop. He didn't even glance up as she walked in and sat down in the chair opposite him. What did people who actually loved their spouses talk about? All the two of them ever discussed was strategy and logistics and work. How to look like they liked each other. How to position themselves. William didn't need to hear about what was going on in her head or how she was feeling, and she certainly had no interest in knowing his. It had always worked for them, but lately, she found herself wondering if other people had something better.

“Our friend Cassandra is asking for more money,” Margot said by way of greeting, resting her elbows on the table and clasping her hands.

“And?” replied Will without looking up from whatever article he was currently reading. “We give her more money. Simple. Just wire it into the account and move on with your day.”

“This has to stop eventually,” she sighed, gazing out the window at the foggy, dismal autumn weather.

“It will,” her husband replied with a disinterested shrug, “as soon as we track her down and get her to sign an NDA. In the meantime, there's too much at stake to take such a gamble. It's only a month until the election. As long as it stays quiet until then, that's all that matters. That's what you've been saying all along.”

And it was what mattered. Right from the start, there hadn't been a doubt in Margot's mind. They could easily afford this, so there was no reason to fret. There was no one who could be trusted completely when everything was at stake, even lawyers, so they simply threw money at the problem and made it go away for a while. Eventually, they would find out who she was, and then they could get their legal team involved and sort out everything from there. There was nothing noteworthy about this. Just another opportunist who was out to make a quick dollar. No big deal. So, why was Margot

suddenly so bothered by it?

“But what if it isn't?” she mused out loud, her brows furrowing.

William finally looked up from his computer screen, staring at her with a puzzled expression. “Isn't what, Margie?” he asked, sighing heavily and sounding exasperated.

“What if it isn't all that matters?” she replied, rolling her head to try to release some of the tension that had settled into her shoulders. “What if we lose ourselves in the process of winning?”

Will huffed a humorless laugh and shook his head incredulously. “What's gotten into you lately?” he asked. “You've been acting crazy for weeks. Don't tell me you're starting to lose your edge now, because we can't afford that.”

“Doesn't it ever bother you, Will?” came her unexpected response. “All the sacrifices, the compromises we've had to make, the lies? If I'd been true to myself in the first place, this woman wouldn't have any leverage. It's only scandalous because I chose to hide this side of me in the first place. If this had happened to Thurston, she'd laugh it off as a college indiscretion, and no one would bat an eye beyond that. Why did I think it was something shameful I had to keep hidden?”

The silence that followed was stifling and oppressive. She felt like she could choke on it. When she glanced back at her husband, there was no sympathy or understanding to be found, just suspicious, frustrated confusion. His eyes narrowed slightly as he studied her, searching her face for clues as to where this had come from.

“Margot,” he said slowly, “we made that call when we got married thirty years ago. You can't seriously be second-guessing it now, when everything we've spent these

years working on is finally on the verge of coming together. We are about to be the most powerful couple in America. Whatever the hell this is, you need to snap out of it immediately.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

“That's easy for you to say!” she snapped, glowering at him. “You and Tom go to your stupid baseball games and play golf together whenever you like, and nobody asks questions because you've got me covering for you. You get to have everything, and I'm the one doing all the hard work. All you have to do is show up and smile.”

“Excuse me?” William retorted angrily, shutting the laptop and fixing her with a withering glare. “You couldn't have pulled any of this off without me. Who took care of everything so you could focus on climbing that ladder all the way to the top? I've spent decades making deals, networking, finding donors, keeping the wolves at bay. All so we could have everything that's about to come to us. And now you're getting cold feet because you want more. Honestly, I am so tired of your tantrums?—”

“Tantrums?” Margot demanded, rising to her feet and slamming her hand down on the table between them. “Anyone could have done the things you do. I could have found literally any decent-looking trust-fund baby and put him in a suit, and he could have done everything you do for me. I'm constantly compromising and suppressing who I am and what I want, while you spend almost every weekend off with your 'friend,' and you want to act like you're the one getting the short end of the stick? How dare you?”

“Margot, we are five weeks from winning the presidency,” William answered slowly through gritted teeth, squaring his shoulders and balling his fists. “You want to have a mid-life crisis about your own damn choices, do it later. This is the path we decided on together. If you wanted to flounce off and find some new-age lesbian art teacher to screw around with, you should have done it before we started all of this. Now you either get yourself together, or you will ruin everything we have spent our whole lives building toward.”

Anger was pulsing in Margot's ears and her heart rate skyrocketed. The blood rushed to her face. She could barely hear past the noise. There was a fire raging inside her chest as stared daggers at the man in front of her. In this moment, she hated him. Resented every second she'd spent staging photo ops and playing house and convincing the world that the perfect storybook romance existed between the two of them. Margot loathed that she had wasted her youth on this sham rather than pursuing something real, meaningful, and authentic. That she had denied herself so many wonderful possibilities in life in order to get here. What had it all been for, anyway? What did she believe in?

"I'm so tired!" she exclaimed, throwing her arms up in the air in despair. "I'm tired of lying. Tired of pretending. Tired of living in fear and hiding who I am. Maybe if I weren't trying to juggle all of that, I could win the election on my own merit, but instead, we attack and lie and spread fear and hatred to incite people because that's how we get votes. What kind of legacy is that?"

All the thoughts and feelings she had grappled with for decades were pouring out of her, boiling over from the pot she tried so desperately to keep covered and hidden. For once, Margot let the floodgates open and the words came spilling out, unfiltered and unrestrained, wild and untamed. Twenty years of pain, exhaustion, repression, and resentment. A lifetime of contorting herself into a shape that didn't fit for the sake of ambition, leaving no space or energy to even discover who she really was. She wanted to scream it to the world so everyone could see what was really underneath that perfectly coiffed exterior. God, she?—

"Jesus Christ," William spat, cutting into her thoughts, and pushed himself off the chair, his eyes cold and sharp with rage. "We don't have time for this nonsense, Margot. Pull yourself together. Now."

Without another word, he spun around on his heel, strode quickly out of the room, and up the stairs. Margot heard the door to his office slam shut with a resounding

boom. Silence hung oppressively in the room and she found herself struggling to breathe evenly, gasping in ragged breaths that tore through her lungs and left them aching. Tears stung Margot's eyes as she ran a trembling hand through her perfectly styled golden hair, causing the strands to fall free and hang around her face messily.

Still shaking, Margot sank back into her seat, holding her head in her hands. She felt dizzy, like the world was spinning too fast and she had no grasp on reality anymore. Was this really the life she had wanted? The victory she had dreamed of since she was a little girl? To become a soulless, broken shell of a person chasing fleeting power and riches? Sacrificing the rest of her life and personal happiness to claw her way to the top?

Margot was falling apart and there was no one around to pick up the pieces. There was no one she could turn to. No one she trusted. No one who saw her. No one who cared. Just Margot and her ambition, all alone at the top of the world.

13

## FRANCESCA

With only a month to go before the election, the stakes were higher than they'd ever been before. It had been weeks since the first debate, which had ended in something of a tie in the polls. Both candidates had been at the top of their game during the event, dazzling the crowd and eloquently answering question after question. After the fiasco involving the false scandal about Francesca's campaign funds, she had fallen behind very slightly in the polls, but her team had mostly recuperated by now. Tonight could make or break their progress during the final stretch, however.

This debate was held in Seattle, and as fitting for the famously rainy city, the clouds had been gloomy and grey all afternoon leading up to it. Fall was upon them in full force, with strong winds, heavy rain, and brisk temperatures. The weather suited her

mood perfectly, Francesca mused, as she watched the raindrops slide down the windowpane. Her leg bounced nervously as she sat with her chin in her hand, staring blankly at the cityscape sprawling out below her. The streets and buildings were blurred through the glass, looking gray and faded.

Her body felt heavy and drained from months of stress and emotional exhaustion. More and more every day, she was looking forward to November 6th, whether she won or lost--for no other reason than to be able to get a solid eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. Not to have to wake up early for interviews, make public statements, or worry about fundraising calls.

Of course, should Francesca be elected, the respite would be brief before she would be inundated with even more responsibilities, but that would be a different kind of taxing. She would be firmly on the path to making real change for millions of people, both in the U.S. and abroad, with none of this endless strategizing and positioning she was used to dealing with every day of this campaign trail. No Margot Smith to drive her crazy, both in the media and in person, and on a constant basis.

That was a strange thought. They hadn't spoken directly since the luncheon at the White House, when their altercation in the bathroom had resulted in another reckless and irresponsible tryst. Part of Francesca still felt bad about how that had ended. It had almost seemed like Margot was expecting something from her, not necessarily romantic affection, but maybe not brushing it under the rug and denying it so hastily. The situation was terribly confusing. In Chicago, it had been Margot who had immediately dismissed their night together as a regrettable mistake. There was no reason to think the icy Congresswoman had changed her mind. But . . .

No, this was a pointless exercise, and it was distracting Francesca from what Juliet was saying. She sighed, rubbing her forehead tiredly, and returned her attention to the friend sitting in front of her desk. They were running through last-minute debate notes and which talking points to review before they departed. According to recent

polls, Margot had a slight lead going in, owing mostly to the recent debacle. It was insignificant enough to be dismissed as a potential polling error, though, and a successful showing tonight could be enough to swing it back.

“So if it comes up, just reassert everything we've been saying to the press so far,” Juliet finished, pointing at a bullet point at the bottom of the page in front of Francesca. “We have nothing to hide, and our financial reports and records have been released already, proving that there's absolutely nothing wrong. Move past it and play to your strengths. Education, healthcare reform, civil rights. You've done this a million times, Frankie. I don't know what you're so worried about.”

Francesca sighed deeply and leaned back in her chair, resting one arm over the backrest as she smiled sheepishly at her old friend and colleague. They'd made quite a formidable team through the years, collaborating closely on numerous political projects and initiatives with varying degrees of success. Francesca had always appreciated her cool, professional demeanor, analytical brilliance, and razor-sharp wit.

Without Juliet, however, none of this would have been possible. Without the whole team, really. Good folks who had put their all into this effort, often at great personal risk. She owed it to all of them to get out there tonight and to give as much as she could of herself, even when all she wanted was a good meal and an even better night of sleep. That thought helped ground Francesca in the present again. Her team, as well as her supporters, deserved no less than her full commitment. She had a purpose, a cause, and an electorate that was waiting for her.

“Thank you, Jules,” Francesca finally answered, with a grateful nod. “Let's do this. What do you say--are you ready to slay another dragon?”

“Right behind you, Frankie,” the younger woman confirmed with a grin, snapping the folder shut decisively. “Waiting in the wings with a glass of wine for you when



you're done. Let's roll.”

Francesca picked up her bag, blazer, and papers, and followed the campaign manager toward the waiting car. The women smiled contentedly as they went. A short car ride took them to the venue, where crowds of reporters and paparazzi were already congregating outside, scrambling for photos of the candidates. Security ushered her past them efficiently, although Francesca made sure to wave and smile politely on her way past the crowd. Always a good idea to stay on the good side of the media whenever possible. It wouldn't hurt, at the very least.

It was a fairly typical debate setting: an auditorium with stadium-style seating set up around two chairs at the center, several flags lining the backdrop, and stage lighting that was harsh on the eyes if she looked directly at it. Francesca nodded a greeting to several of the other staff members as she walked in, going through the pre-debate ritual of shaking hands with important local party leaders, photographers, and news people. The cameramen were adjusting their equipment and doing sound checks in various locations. It would all be transmitted live, of course, directly into the homes of millions of viewers. The pressure was on.

When Margot stepped out from behind a curtain on the opposite end of the stage, Francesca's breath caught in her throat. Margot radiated pure elegance and grace. She moved fluidly toward them, waving at the assembled crowd and posing for a few photos. She looked stunning in a classic black pantsuit that accentuated her figure, with her freshly highlighted hair pinned back to frame her elegant features. Their eyes met across the distance for a moment and Francesca had to swallow, her pulse quickening inexplicably. Margot looked away almost immediately, walking over to the other side of the stage to greet some prominent congressmen who had come to support their former colleague.

Eventually, Francesca and Margot stepped toward each other to shake hands before the debate began. Francesca didn't think anything could shake her resolve, but as

those blue eyes met hers for the first time in weeks, her knees felt weak. It took a considerable amount of concentration not to gawk foolishly, and that surge of regret about their last encounter resurfaced as their hands connected briefly.

Neither of them said anything to each other as they returned to their respective seats, and Margot kept her gaze turned firmly ahead. This close up, though, it was impossible for Francesca to ignore her pallid complexion, the dark rings surrounding her eyes, and the slight hollowness to her cheekbones--despite the impeccable makeup job. Something wasn't right. What could possibly have shaken the unflappable Congresswoman Smith so badly?

There was no time to contemplate further, however, as their teams checked their microphones and adjusted their notes. Excitement and nervous anticipation flurried around the room, heightening as the official moderator stepped onto the platform. A wave of applause followed as he introduced himself and began with a few opening remarks about the purpose and format of the event, and how the evening's discussion would be divided up between the two candidates.

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

After welcoming the audience, he turned to the camera and addressed the viewers at home, outlining the current state of affairs before quickly reminding everyone of the election date and their duty to register to vote in time. Finally, he welcomed the two women to the stage, giving each a brief introduction and summary of their accomplishments before offering a succinct overview of the major issues they would be discussing.

It was all needlessly long-winded, Francesca thought. The moderator at the last debate had been much more charismatic. This one looked and sounded bored, and it was obvious to anyone that he was reading off the teleprompter. He was one of the board members on the debate commission, clearly very proud of the commission's work—and deservedly so—but not much of a TV personality. Maybe he was nervous. It didn't matter much either way, though. No one tuned in to a presidential debate for the moderator, and soon enough, they would be diving into the meat of it. The championship round.

Finally, it was time for their opening remarks. This time, Margot was the first to speak, so Francesca leaned back slightly to watch her opponent. She awaited the inevitable full-out violent offense that had become her signature style in a debate.

Instead, there was something unusually subdued in Margot's mannerisms. The customary confident aura that surrounded her like an impenetrable forcefield was missing, and that sense of exhaustion from earlier was almost palpable now. As Margot straightened up in her seat, her usually unwavering eyes locked on the camera lens before her, a hint of trepidation crossed her otherwise refined, practiced expression.

“Good evening,” she began, in a remarkably gentle tone compared to her previous performances. The customary smile fell into place, but it seemed to lack some of its usual sparkle. “First of all, I’d like to extend my thanks to the Commission for hosting this debate, to the engaged voters in attendance here today, and to countless others tuning in at home. It’s an honor to be here tonight representing my fellow Americans.”

She paused briefly, collecting herself before continuing, her eyes flickering between the moderator, the teleprompter, and the camera lens, but never settling on any of them with confidence. Francesca studied her curiously, leaning forward in her chair to rest her chin in one hand as she listened to her opponent.

The speech itself was standard fare—the expected platitudes, lofty ambitions, and a few empty promises designed to appeal to certain demographics without alienating others. It was much more subdued than usual, though. No sharp, pointed digs or jabs aimed directly at Francesca and her party. This was surprising, considering Margot had scored some significant damage points with the allegations against the campaign finances. Francesca’s team had been expecting that to be the main thrust of Margot’s debate performance tonight, riling up the angry mass who subscribed to online conspiracy theories.

Tonight’s performance was flat, somehow. Emotionless. Nothing like the passionate, firework-display oration that had so captivated audiences before. There was nothing objectively wrong with it—it touched on the most important aspects of Margot’s platform and it was eloquent and polished—but it lacked any sort of vibrancy. Margot seemed, for lack of a better word, off.

Francesca’s first reaction was worry. That had to mean that she had something up her sleeve for later, some kind of bombshell or shock tactic she would spring on her at the last moment. That would explain Margot’s unexpected meekness. On the other hand, that would be a strange strategy. Not at all what Margot’s supporters would

want or expect. Bold, flashy moves were what had gotten her where she was, and the polls reflected that it still worked well. This was very odd.

There was no time to linger on that, though, because soon enough, it was Francesca's turn to speak. She straightened her shoulders and took a deep breath, clearing her mind and steeling herself for battle, then flashed a warm, genuine smile and said hello to the cameras in front of her. The sight of familiar faces in the crowd and Juliet waving encouragingly from the sidelines centered her, and Francesca launched into her spiel with ease.

It was like riding a bike, this whole speaking-in-front-of-a-crowd thing, and there was nothing she enjoyed more than talking about her values and issues. Francesca spoke passionately about healthcare reform and education funding, making jokes where appropriate that made the audience laugh as she referenced relevant anecdotes from her years of experience. The people's energy buzzed around her, responding easily to Francesca's enthusiasm and charm, and she played off it expertly. This was why she ran, because she loved seeing people motivated and excited by ideas. When they listened and believed in her message, everything felt worth it.

The debate progressed in a similar fashion. The candidates were asked questions, some from the moderation team and some from the audience. Francesca was on fire, answering with confidence, poise, and humor. She effortlessly fielded questions about marriage equality, gun control, and immigration reform, while easily dismissing those that expressed concern about the alleged financial scandal by assuring the voters that her campaign finances were entirely transparent, and that her team was looking into Claire's claims. Francesca didn't miss a beat, hitting all her marks flawlessly, and she could feel the impact she had on her audience. It was easy. Like breathing.

Meanwhile, Margot seemed distracted. Several times, it became painfully apparent that she hadn't fully processed what she had been asked. At one point, it took Margot

a full five seconds to realize that she had been asked a question, staring blankly at the audience member who had asked it as if he had just spoken Greek to her. It wasn't a hard question, either. Entirely in her ballpark: an easy question about labor unions and international trade deals that was practically designed so Margot could go off on a tirade about how damaging Francesca's tax plans would supposedly be to business owners and the American economy.

Instead, Margot remained silent, blue eyes blinking owlishly. Eventually, the question was repeated and a look of realization came over Margot's face. Even then, her reply was dull and stilted, rattling off the exact points that would be expected, without any of the usual passion or conviction. It was like Margot was present only physically, while her mind was miles away. If Francesca didn't know better, she would think Margot was drunk. She seemed completely detached from her surroundings, which couldn't have been further from her usual methodical, ruthless approach to these kinds of discussions.

In short, it was strange. Downright surreal. And more than a little worrying. As much as Francesca did genuinely want to win the election, and that there could be no doubt by the time they left the stage that this debate had gone in her favor, she felt unsettled. Something was seriously wrong. The Margot Smith she knew and had spent most of her adult life watching professionally was not the person who had sat across from her tonight. Where was the relentless, indomitable spirit that had always distinguished this formidable politician? Where were the biting retorts, the sly comebacks, and the laser focus?

“You killed it, Frankie,” said her brother Marcus, wrapping an arm amiably around her shoulder as they walked offstage at the conclusion of the debate. He grinned widely at her. Francesca’s younger siblings had flown out for the evening's big event to cheer her on. They were all gathering around her now, smiling and hugging her. “This is a landslide victory for you! That last bit about police brutality and racial profiling really hit home.”

“Taking it straight to the White House with that,” Samuel agreed, clapping enthusiastically in spite of himself as he reached out to take his older sister's hand warmly.

“Grandpa says he's so proud,” Eleanor added with a grin, holding her phone to her ear, apparently talking to the man himself.

Francesca let the praise wash over her, feeling warmth spreading from the tips of her fingers and toes into her chest. Her family's support meant the world to her, and all the advice and encouragement they provided along the way had been invaluable. These people were her roots, her foundation, and they kept her grounded during the campaign trail when everything felt crazy.

Still, she couldn't stop thinking about Margot as her family and staff chattered excitedly on the way back to the hotel. Throughout the debate, Margot had barely looked at her, a sharp contrast to her usual habit of sneering confidently or smirking condescendingly at every response. All Francesca could recall was a distinct sense of weariness emanating from the woman. Margot's typically impeccable posture had slumped slightly throughout the evening and her responses had been slow and lethargic, rattling off talking points without even an attempt at acting like she believed them.

The media had noticed, too. On their way up to the meeting room that they had rented for a quick get-together to celebrate, Juliet gave a recap of the social media reactions and headlines already coming in, reading them off of her tablet.

“They're saying you smashed it out of the park and showed real leadership, whereas Senator Smith seemed lost, unfocused, and off-guard,” she reported with a wide grin. “Even right-wing media is struggling to spin this. They're making an effort to paint you as aggressive and volatile, obviously, but they're not even mentioning Smith's performance. Uncontested home run, Frankie. This went better than we could have

imagined.”

“But, that was weird, wasn't it?” Francesca mused, her brows furrowing. “That was an entirely different person from the Margot Smith I know. Do you think she's all right?”

Juliet shrugged dismissively. “Who cares?” she laughed. “After all the hell they've put us through, I'm calling it karma. This is just God telling us you deserve this win for all your hard work. Now, let's have a drink and celebrate this incredible day.”

Spirits were high in the meeting room, with a few bottles of champagne cracked open and people celebrating and chattering among themselves. Francesca couldn't shake the lingering concern she felt in her gut, however. She watched as people raised their glasses to her and made speeches, laughing and drinking happily, but she couldn't bring herself to fully join in the revelry.

For one thing, it didn't feel like a real victory. It wasn't a real match when her opponent hadn't shown up to play. More importantly, though, Francesca was worried. She kept thinking back to that brief look of hurt before they parted ways at the White House--that flicker of confusion and uncertainty in Margot's normally cold, steely blue eyes. A real moment of vulnerability. An unsettling glimpse behind the immaculate mask of professionalism to something raw, unpracticed, and human. Something unexpected and unknown, which was perhaps even more compelling than all the glitz and glamour. Despite everything, her heart ached for Margot.

Francesca stepped outside briefly for some air, and as she looked out over the dreary Seattle skyline, the rain clouds thickened overhead. Leaning on the railing, she picked up her phone and typed out a text message without giving herself a chance to second-guess herself.

Francesca: Hope you're okay, Margot. We should talk sometime. Please reach out



when you can.

14

MARGOT

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Everything had fallen apart. There were so many things wrong with Margot's life right now that she hardly knew where to begin picking up the pieces. How was it even possible for everything to collapse all at once and so rapidly? Just a month ago, Margot was coasting toward the biggest prize she had ever pursued. Now, she wasn't even sure she wanted it, nor if she ever really had.

Immediately after that disaster of a debate, she had retreated to the privacy of her suite, locking out the rest of the world. She had changed into a lavender silk pajama set, fully expecting to curl up in bed and forget the world. Sleep hadn't come, though, and now Margot was sitting on the sofa, staring out at the grey sky.

Her entire worldview had become a confusing, incohesive mess. Everything was convoluted and messed up. She found it incredibly difficult to stay focused on anything. Couldn't find the will to care about all these things she'd been obsessing over for the past decade. What was happening to her? Who was she and how she had ended up here? How long it would be until she could crawl out from under the weight crushing her ribs?

An unexpected text message popped up and Margot arched her eyebrows in surprise when she saw it. She'd assumed Francesca was off celebrating, probably gloating and basking in her success. After all, Margot had been unprepared and incompetent during the debate. Completely ineffectual and useless. If their roles had been reversed, Margot would probably be enjoying herself immensely.

She rolled her eyes and put the phone down without responding. The last thing she needed was pity from someone who would relish her humiliation more than anyone in the long run.

Several minutes passed, and the phone buzzed again. Irritated, Margot reached out for it to toss it aside in frustration and annoyance, when the preview window indicated another new text. Hesitating, she picked it up and unlocked it, pursing her lips thoughtfully as she read the message.

Francesca: I don't like the way tonight went. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I got the sense that something is bothering you a great deal. You didn't seem like yourself out there. You're one of the best politicians I've known, and if something is troubling you enough to affect you like this, I would hope you have someone to talk to about it. If not, my door is always open.

Despite herself, a wry smile pulled at Margot's lips. She imagined Francesca's warm, rich voice saying those words with the same fire and passion she used to make speeches. It was exactly the sort of gesture that characterized the other woman: earnest, heartfelt, compassionate, generous—to a fault, really. God, it would be so wonderful to have someone like that in her life. Someone who genuinely cared about the world and those who inhabited it. Someone who cared about her, not just about what she could do for them.

Taking another deep sip of white wine from the bottle next to her, Margot sighed and started typing a reply. It had been a long time since she had been honest with anyone, let alone herself. Her head was aching, her eyelids heavy with exhaustion, and she couldn't muster the willpower to resist the temptation. Her life was already crumbling to pieces. Why not throw caution to the wind and see what happened?

Margot: Got a lot on my mind. Congratulations, by the way. You were incredible tonight. You always are.

Before she had a chance to overthink it, she sent the message. The seconds seemed to stretch out indefinitely, and Margot took a few deep breaths in an effort to calm her racing heart. This was stupid, she thought to herself angrily. Absolutely pathetic. She

wasn't some teenager mooning over her crush. Still, when another message appeared moments later, her heart skipped a beat. It was a simple message, asking if this was a good time to talk. Margot confirmed, and almost immediately, Francesca asked where she was staying and if she could come by.

Margot didn't hesitate, quickly giving her the hotel address, her suite number, and alerting the staff to allow her up without fuss. Through all of this, Margot shut off her brain, refusing to listen to the nagging voice in her head that reminded her about who she was supposed to be, what people expected of her, and why none of this was a good idea. That voice had controlled her whole life for twenty years. Tonight, Margot was going to let loose a little and be true to her feelings, whatever they might be.

When the knock came at the door, her stomach lurched involuntarily and Margot hesitated a moment before opening, taking a deep breath to steady herself. The women stood in the doorway for a moment, looking at each other, both a little uncertain about how to proceed. Margot wasn't quite sure what to expect. Francesca looked casual but striking, having changed into jeans and a flowing, comfortable black shirt instead of the smart pantsuit she'd been wearing at the debate. Margot had never before seen her in casual wear and she liked it.

“Can I come in?” Francesca asked with a friendly smile.

Margot felt an uncomfortable flush rise in her cheeks. Maybe this had been a terrible idea. Of course it is! her brain yelled at her, but in the physical world, Margot nodded and gestured wordlessly for Francesca to follow her inside. Tension hung heavy in the air between them as they sat down on opposite sides of the couch in the main living space. Margot felt strangely naked without all her professional armor on, especially looking into those deep, concerned eyes. It took conscious effort to maintain eye contact rather than staring at the floor or her hands like an embarrassed schoolgirl.

“So, what the hell happened tonight?” asked Francesca, her tone light and conversational. “Did you eat some bad seafood? Because the Margot I know wouldn't have just sat back and taken it without fighting tooth and nail for every inch.”

It made Margot chuckle dryly, and she shrugged, leaning back against the armrest. “What do you care? Didn't you love every minute of it?”

“Not really, no,” Francesca replied earnestly. “I was worried about you. I still am.”

“Why?” Margot asked curiously. “That debacle probably won you a solid five points in the polls. It's not often that you get a gift-wrapped victory.”

“Maybe,” conceded Francesca, “but winning isn't the only thing that matters. I don't like it when people get hurt along the way. You look tired. And sad, actually. Are you all right, Margot?”

That was the thing Margot had never understood about her opponent. Despite everything, despite the stakes and the competition, Francesca never stopped caring about people. That had been incomprehensible and, frankly, a little insulting to Margot until very recently. It went against everything she believed about what it cost to get to the top of the food chain. Compassion was weakness. But maybe she'd just never seen true empathy before. Maybe there were some people whose hearts were still kind and real, even in their unforgiving world, and Margot had somehow missed out on that entirely during her meteoric rise.

“No, I don't think I am,” she answered after a while, running her fingers through her hair as she glanced back at the dark city outside. “You got in my head with all that talk about integrity and being who you really are. About believing in things. In people. You're insufferable, you know that?”

Francesca laughed softly, shrugging. “I've been told that more than a few times,” she

admitted, “but I have to say, you're the last person whose mind I was expecting to change with any of that. Is there a conscience lurking somewhere underneath that icy exterior after all?”

Margot snorted. “God help me, I think there might be,” she sighed theatrically. “It's absolutely dreadful. How do people live like this?”

They chuckled together briefly, falling silent again. As her laughter faded, however, Francesca turned serious again, studying Margot intently. They hadn't gotten this close or spoken this candidly before, and even in normal circumstances, this would have made Margot uneasy. Right now, though, it felt surprisingly easy to trust this woman and to confide in her. Margot could almost feel the kindness and genuine compassion permeating through the air, warm and soothing, washing over her.

“Really, though, your perspective has been making me question a lot of things,” she continued, twirling a lock of hair around her finger. “I chose ambition over everything else a long time ago. I chose it over happiness, love, fulfillment, all of that. I thought that if I was going to get ahead, I had to live my life a certain way. Dress, talk, and act a certain way. Get married to a respectable gentleman and play the part of the devoted wife. Love never factored into it. Not for either one of us. It was all just convenient.”

“I have been wondering about that,” Francesca mused. “Not to put too fine a point on it, but you certainly haven't seen all that worried about your husband during our last, ah, encounters, as it were.”

Margot chuckled bitterly, waving her hand dismissively. “It's all a sham,” she said nonchalantly. “You must have figured that out already. I've never been the slightest bit attracted to Will—or any man—and he's got a partner up in Vermont. We've been friends since we were children. Or, well, we used to be friends. These days, we mostly tolerate each other. Getting married would help both our images, so we did.

Made our parents happy, and don't we just look so lovely together in the photos?"

Margot's voice was tinged with self-loathing and frustration as she explained, her fingers pulling at the hem of the silken pajamas absentmindedly. It felt good to admit this to someone. It felt liberating. Like the first drop of water landing on the desert sand after years of dehydration. And God, Margot was so parched.

"That sounds exhausting," Francesca laughed softly. "I couldn't live like that if I tried. I get it, though. Being an openly gay woman in this business is rough, and I'm sure more so at the time you were starting out and I can't imagine your voter base would have responded well to a lesbian congresswoman."

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

“Pah,” Margot spat. “We both know I’d never have been elected,” Margot said with another shrug. “Where I come from, that sort of thing goes over as well as the plague. So I figured that was how it had to be, right?” She paused, glancing over at Francesca thoughtfully. “But then there's you, and you're living your life on your terms, embracing who you are, and it never even slowed you down. That pisses me off, Francesca.”

“Ah,” Francesca interjected, leaning closer with a sly smile. “There she is. That fire. That's the Margot I know. It's good to see her again.”

Heat rose in Margot's face as they exchanged a long, meaningful glance. Those brown eyes seemed to dance, reflecting the ambient lights of the darkened cityscape. A flicker of warmth sparked in the pit of Margot's stomach, and for once, it was without the rage and shame she'd become accustomed to feeling over the past thirty years of her life. It had been ages since anything had felt so good. Years since she'd connected with anyone on any kind of real level. In spite of all their differences, and even with the history they shared, in this moment, it felt right.

“For what it's worth, I'm sorry about those false rumors,” she said after a while.

“Ah, you admit it at last,” Francesca grinned.

“Darlin', please. Like you were ever in doubt,” Margot drawled with a lazy smirk, and Francesca shrugged and nodded. “I panicked and resorted to desperate measures. Even my team thought it was a bad idea. I haven't been thinking straight for months. I know that's not an excuse, but I regret it. Sincerely.”



For a second, Francesca just looked at her in stunned silence. The apology seemed to take her aback. Then she laughed and shook her head, crossing one leg over the other.

“Well, we've mostly recovered, and the people spouting conspiracies were never going to vote for us anyway,” Francesca sighed eventually. “Gave us all a massive headache, but that's politics, right? At least you were right that we should have been prepared for you doing something like that, whether or not that's how I think this should work. What had you in such a panic anyway? You've always been the coolest, most composed person at any given table. Never seen you shaken.”

Margot tilted her head back thoughtfully, tapping her bottom lip with a fingernail. “I'm being blackmailed,” she finally admitted. “A former lover of mine. Probably. Can't remember who she is, but she's got photos of us together from my college days. Calls herself Cassandra, and she's been sending old pictures for months now, demanding money. The money isn't an issue. We have enough of it. But the constant threat of my deepest, darkest secret coming out has left me feeling cornered. Paranoid. So I lashed out at you as a preemptive strike, I guess. Which was stupid and pointless, in retrospect.”

“That's horrible!” Francesca exclaimed with genuine sympathy in her voice. “That's illegal, Margot. Have you reported this?”

“Well, obviously not,” Margot replied immediately. “What if it got out? It would end my career, no question.”

“No, I can see that, but?—”

“And that's had me thinking, you know, what if I'd never hid it in the first place? What if I'd just come out and been honest from the start? I could have lived my truth and inspired people like you do. Fought for things I actually believe in,” Margot mused wistfully. “But now, I'd be the con artist who's been lying to the whole world

for so many years. And I just don't know if this was worth it.”

Francesca studied her closely for a long time, leaning forward to rest her elbows on her knees, a thoughtful frown creasing her brow. She reached out a hand, placing it on Margot's knee gingerly. After the night's revelations, the touch sent electric sparks radiating up Margot's thigh, spreading slowly through her body, leaving her tingling from head to toe. Almost instinctively, she lifted her own hand to cover it, squeezing gently as she held Francesca's gaze. Whatever this was, it felt right. Exactly what she needed right now.

“I'm sorry you've had to live that way,” the younger woman said softly. “I'm sorry anyone does. Hiding who you are out of fear doesn't make you weak, though. It makes you a human being who happens to live in a world that hasn't caught up with itself yet. For all the strides we've made, unfortunately, there's still a lot of work to do. I hope the next Margot Smith who comes along isn't forced to make the same choices.”

Margot nodded slowly, her chest tightening. Her vision was becoming blurry as tears burned at her eyes. When she swallowed, her throat felt sore and dry. She was on the verge of losing control. When Francesca scooted toward her and wrapped her strong arms around Margot's shoulders in a firm embrace, Margot melted into the embrace instinctively, clinging to her tightly, burying her face into Francesca's neck. Francesca rubbed her back reassuringly, holding her securely until the tide receded.

They sat like that for hours, talking and holding each other, getting to know each other for real. For the first time in her life, Margot found herself genuinely connecting with someone, emotionally and intellectually. Being open in a way she never ever had before. She shared stories from her childhood, about her family and friends, all the things she'd been missing out on over the last decades of political workaholism.

Francesca had a knack for storytelling. Hearing her talk animatedly about the

challenges of starting an LGBTQ+ youth shelter from scratch or organizing her grandmother's eightieth birthday party made Margot laugh several times. By the time they finished their bottle of wine and Francesca got up to return to her hotel, Margot almost felt like a real person, rather than a piece in the great machine of power that had consumed her.

She fell asleep easily, giddy and hopeful, marveling that this wonderful, unique woman who had dominated her life for such a long time seemed to genuinely care for her despite all the lies and political machinations. It had been so long since she'd let anyone get close to her—both physically and emotionally—that the unfamiliarity of it was exciting rather than intimidating. Her dreams were filled with images of soft brown eyes, smooth caramel skin, and full lips on hers, enveloping her in comforting warmth. It was all so enticing that she almost didn't want to wake up.

A loud, frantic, insistent knock on the door firmly prevented that wish from being granted. Groaning, she checked the clock radio on the bedside table. Barely six in the morning. She picked up her phone, and saw, to her horror, about a hundred missed calls and texts from various members of her campaign staff. Immediately, she darted upright, heart leaping into her throat. Rushing to the door, her mind flooded with terrifying scenarios of national security threats, terrorism attacks, and assassinations. This couldn't be good.

William stepped inside, his eyes wide, ashen face contorted into an expression of absolute shock and bewilderment. Margot's eyes darted down to his hand, where he was holding a rolled up newspaper in a clenched white fist. His knuckles seemed to strain so hard they almost burst through his skin, shaking violently. Wordlessly, he shoved the newspaper into Margot's hand, backing up a step to look at her in horrified silence.

She blinked in confusion, then unfurled the paper, still somewhat dazed and groggy from being torn from sleep only moments before. The sight of herself on the front

page, barely dressed, locked in a passionate embrace with another woman, stared back at her in all its blurry, pixelated glory. She recognized the photo instantly, having spent weeks obsessively studying the grainy images Cassandra had sent. Somehow, they had never looked quite as damning as they did now, blown up and printed for the world to see.

Horrified, she threw the paper across the room as if it had burned her, staring up at William in dismay. His expression mirrored hers perfectly, only amplified. This was the worst possible outcome. They had agreed to pay whatever amount necessary to ensure the scandal never came to light, but here it was now, staring them in the face. How had they gotten their hands on this?

“What the hell?” Margot breathed, sinking down on the sofa, trying desperately to regain her composure and come to grips with the situation. “We paid her! Who leaked this? Where did this come from? How the hell is this happening?”

“It's not just the photo, Margot,” William said, his voice weak and exhausted. “Someone tracked her down. There's a whole interview in here. I don't know how we can spin this. It's bad. Really bad.”

Margot nodded, inhaling deeply as she closed her eyes to focus. Her thoughts whirled madly, trying to make sense of this. How could the press possibly have found out about this? The only people who knew were Charlotte and Michael, and they had no interest in leaking this unless it somehow worked in Margot's favor, which it unquestionably didn't. She hadn't mentioned it to anyone. Not a single soul.

Not until last night.

And who had more to gain from this than Francesca?

FRANCESCA

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

“At least you're going to win,” Juliet said drily, gazing up at the screen in their office space.

“Really, Jules?” Francesca asked flatly, shooting her old friend a disapproving look. “That's your takeaway here?”

The article published a few days ago about Margot's torrid college affair with another woman, combined with the disastrous debate performance, had tanked her ratings overnight. They were less than three weeks out from Election Day, and the polls were painting a clear picture.

It would take an actual act of God at this point to reverse the damage. The Virginian congresswoman was falling rapidly out of contention, losing support in states previously considered swing votes, and the party was at war with itself, trying to figure out how they would save face in November. Some of them were pragmatic enough to recognize that they didn't have a better option available to win the presidency and therefore had to keep supporting their candidate. The more hardline traditionalists, on the other hand—the staunch evangelicals, diehard conservatives, and the “family values” crowd—were loudly abandoning ship at every opportunity. No surprise there.

“Well, you are,” Juliet reiterated, shrugging. “Karma's a bitch, huh? She's spent months trying to paint you as a deceitful, unethical liar, and now the whole country knows she's actually the one living a double life. It's poetic justice.”

“Jules,” Francesca said firmly, “I'm not happy that someone's life is being ruined because they were forcibly outed on a global stage. It's a horrible violation and no

one deserves it. That goes against everything we stand for.”

“Sure, I agree,” her campaign manager nodded, “and we'll keep condemning it loudly and passionately. But look on the bright side, right? You're going to be the next President of the United States. We won.”

Francesca sighed heavily, rubbing her temples to try to ease her thundering headache. For the hundredth time in the last few minutes, she checked her phone. Still no reply. Over the last forty-eight hours, she had reached out to Margot repeatedly, both privately and through her staff. Everything from carefully crafted neutral messages of support and well-wishing to more intimate, concerned texts of sympathy. Each of them had remained unopened and unanswered. Francesca had even called, but it had gone straight to voicemail every time.

The staffers they'd managed to contact had made it very clear why. As far as they were concerned, Francesca was behind this and Margot was livid. That, of course, was nonsense. Nonsense that Margot probably did believe, considering her vulnerable, paranoid, furious state, but still nonsense. If her life depended on it, Francesca wouldn't have done something this awful. To think that Margot really believed her capable of this was heartbreaking. Especially now, after they had shared that incredible, transformative evening together.

She was worried about Margot, too. That night, Margot had exposed all her deepest fears and vulnerabilities, exposing how deeply she was hurting and how much she struggled. Then this, in the middle of all of that? Francesca wanted nothing more than to wrap Margot up in her arms and hold her safely until all this went away. Now, she couldn't even reach her. God, this was a mess.

“I hate this,” she mumbled as she slumped back in her chair.

“Yeah, me too,” Juliet agreed sympathetically, checking her watch. “Time to get

going. You can get all that moral outrage out on camera. It'll look really powerful.”

Francesca scoffed humorlessly, taking Juliet's hand when she offered it to help her up. Another interview session with another reporter. Unsurprisingly, her team was being inundated with requests, and she wanted to be out there, letting the world know how profoundly unacceptable this was. She wasn't going to give anyone a chance to speculate that she was happy about this turn of events. A central tenet of her platform was the protection of LGBTQ+ people. Francesca had championed that cause ever since her high school activist days. Winning votes because of this felt utterly wrong and disrespectful, and she had a responsibility to show the world that.

So, in between anxiously awaiting a response from Margot, that was what Francesca did. Racing from one interview or speech to the next, while keeping track of all the different opinions and reactions from across the nation and around the world. At the same time, her team was scrambling to finish off the remaining few weeks before Election Day in a way that wasn't completely centered on this scandal. They couldn't lose focus on all their other causes and commitments just because of this. They had run a positive, optimistic, hopeful campaign focused on making everyone's lives better, and they didn't want to lose sight of that now.

They all knew what the outcome would be, though. As the week progressed, Margot's numbers just kept dropping, with more and more details about her past suddenly popping up into public view. There were speculations about affairs with just about every woman she had ever spoken to, rumors about her marriage, and countless photos circulating around the internet. Nothing was spared from the ravenous appetite for scandal. Every corner of Margot's life was poked, prodded, and violated, while she remained silent throughout, hiding away somewhere in Virginia.

It was beyond disgusting to witness. The fact that society so readily devoured the most personal aspects of Margot's life, feeding a frenzy for more dirt while simultaneously berating her and denying any empathy for the stress and trauma



Margot must surely be going through right now was an offense to everything Francesca stood for and believed in. Every ounce of compassion in her body cried out for action, urging her to do something, anything to make it better. Yet Francesca was helpless to do anything except stay publicly vigilant, condemning the attacks at every turn.

It took a full week of crafting long, heartfelt texts to Margot late at night, begging her to please answer so they could talk, before, finally, she received a terse text back. The notification made Francesca's heart practically leap out of her throat, and she hastily tapped the screen to read the short message.

Margot: In D.C. tomorrow. Meet me at the Hay-Adams Hotel at 9 p.m.

Eagerly, she typed out an affirmative response, asking how Margot was feeling, if there was anything she needed, and if there was anything at all that Francesca could do. The read receipt revealed that Margot saw it almost immediately, but that it went unanswered. Well, that was fine. At least there was contact. Hopefully, this was progress. It didn't seem like Margot was ready to forgive and forget, but at least Francesca could look her in the eye and say exactly what she thought of all of this. Of her. This wasn't something Francesca could fix, but at least she could be there.

When she arrived at the venerable hotel the following night, she was escorted to the suite reserved under Margot's name. Knocking softly, she held her breath. Her heart was racing wildly, thumping against her ribcage almost painfully. It took all her strength and focus not to break down entirely upon laying eyes on Margot once the door swung open. Margot looked haggard, tired, and miserable, with deep shadows around her eyes and her perfect hair looking noticeably less shiny and bouncy than usual.

“Well?” Margot demanded snippily as Francesca stepped inside. “Happy? Did you come here to gloat?”

“Jesus, Margot,” Francesca exhaled as she turned to face her again. “Of course not. This entire situation is horrible. I've been worried sick about you. How are you holding up? Is there anything I can do to help? Do you need anything?”

“Oh, spare me,” snarled Margot with a contemptuous sneer, slamming the door shut and walking over to a dresser to pour herself a drink. “You know, you really had me fooled. I can't believe I fell for your whole earnest, genuine, empathic charade. Honestly? Well done. You outplayed me. I've been playing a role all my life, but I couldn't do it half as well as you.”

Margot's voice had lost some of the clipped, refined polish it normally carried. Instead, it sounded harsh and strained, every syllable dripping with seething contempt and hurt. She lifted the glass to her lips, knocking back the amber liquid with a practiced flourish. Whiskey, judging by the smell emanating toward Francesca. The way her hand shook betrayed a hint of unsteadiness.

“I know you're hurting right now, but that's ridiculous,” Francesca said as calmly as she could, inhaling deeply. “Margot, I wouldn't do this. Not to you, not to anyone. No victory would be worth causing this kind of pain to achieve. I don't know how any of this came out, but it wasn't me.”

“Nobody knew about this, Francesca,” Margot spat at her. “Nobody who isn't currently having their lives and careers destroyed by this, anyway. Except you. I told you and the very next morning, this was splattered across every website and newspaper in the world. What other logical conclusion am I meant to draw from that?”

Francesca frowned, biting her lip thoughtfully as she watched Margot knock back another large gulp of whiskey. She was still standing awkwardly beside the door, unsure of whether or not she would be welcome to approach Margot, wanting desperately to go over and comfort her. Not knowing what else to do, Francesca

stayed put. It was probably for the best.

“If you really believe that, then why am I here?” she asked cautiously. “You know this doesn't make sense, Margot. Even if I had wanted to, and I didn't, how would I possibly be able to get ahold of those photos? You've been trying to track down this person for months. But you think that I somehow not only found her, but convinced her to go to the press, to sit down and do a full interview, and to release pictures you were paying her to keep private—all in less than eight hours? Come on. You aren't stupid.”

Margot seemed to falter for a moment, looking scared and bewildered rather than furious. Her hand was shaking slightly, clutching the glass so tightly it looked like it might shatter. Cautiously, Francesca stepped forward, placing a gentle hand around Margot's to steady her. Margot looked down, frowning. Her brow furrowed, but she didn't pull her hand away, nor did she push Francesca off. Eventually, Margot slowly lowered the glass, while taking a deep, shuddering breath.

“The timing's awfully convenient,” Margot said shakily, sounding like she was trying to convince herself that this narrative actually made logical sense, but not quite able to pull it off convincingly anymore. “You knew I was upset and vulnerable that night, and you showed up at my room and were all, well, you know. And I told you all those things, and then the very next morning...”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

“I came over because I care about you, and I was worried,” Francesca replied softly, caressing the back of Margot's hand gently with her thumb. “Just like I am right now. I had nothing to do with this, Margot. And I'm so sorry it happened. You don't deserve this. You've worked your whole life to be here and have made so many sacrifices. I don't agree with everything you've done over the years, but this goes against everything I've ever stood for. You know that. Don't you?”

Margot shook her head, blinking quickly. Tears gleamed in the corners of her eyes and she collapsed down onto the loveseat behind her, placing the glass on the coffee table before hiding her face in her hands. With a heavy, sad sigh, Francesca knelt in front of Margot, placing a gentle hand on her knee and looking up at her affectionately. God, it hurt to see someone this powerful, confident, and fearless fall apart like this. Knowing she couldn't do anything to stop it made it even worse.

Without thinking, Francesca reached out to take both Margot's hands, and she leaned in so that their foreheads touched. Margot took a few shallow, ragged breaths, but slowly regained her composure, closing her eyes and squeezing Francesca's hands in return. For a while, neither woman spoke. Neither dared to move, afraid to break whatever moment they had stumbled into--sharing quiet, steady breaths together.

Eventually, Francesca straightened up again, smiling sadly. She wanted nothing more than to embrace the beautiful woman in front of her and make it all better. The desire hit her with an almost overwhelming force: the reality of how badly she longed to make Margot feel safe, loved, and accepted. All year, they had been at the forefront of each other's minds, whether it was along with anger, frustration, confusion, longing, or desire. There was no escaping it. Somewhere along the way, she and Margot had become bound to each other. It had to mean something, and Francesca

wanted to find out what that was.

“It wasn't you, was it?” Margot asked after several long moments of silence, her voice small and frail.

“No,” Francesca whispered as she caressed Margot's cheek tenderly. “It wasn't me.”

“Okay,” replied Margot, “I believe you.”

With that, she reached out and pulled Francesca close, claiming her lips with her own. It was a tentative, cautious kiss, nothing like the fiery exchanges they'd shared in the past. The instant Francesca returned the kiss, butterflies fluttered in her stomach and her heart seemed to swell inside her chest--a warm, tingling sensation spreading through every nerve ending in her body. Closing her eyes, Francesca leaned in further, deepening the kiss as her arms wrapped around Margot's waist to draw her closer.

“This is going to pass,” Francesca whispered against her lips. “It's going to be okay. And maybe, when all this is over, you won't have to hide anymore.”

“Promise?” Margot asked softly.

“Promise,” Francesca affirmed, placing another lingering peck on Margot's lips. “Everything will be all right.”

They stayed together all night in that hotel room, gently reassuring each other, exploring this newfound intimacy, and taking comfort in one another's arms. It wasn't a wild and passionate night, full of fire and desperation, as their previous encounters had been. Instead, Francesca wrapped Margot in a tight embrace, stroked her hair, and kissed away her tears. Margot returned the gesture, nuzzling Francesca's neck and stroking her face with trembling fingers. They found peace in the little touches

and exchanged sweet kisses, savoring the closeness and warmth.

Somehow, that felt more intimate than anything that had passed between them before.

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## MARGOT

This should have been devastating. If there was any semblance of sanity left in the world, Margot would have felt like the whole planet was collapsing on top of her, leaving her buried alive rubble of all her dreams and ambitions. Instead, as she strode through the corridor to the conference hall in Arlington, with her chin raised proudly and her shoulders set confidently, she felt nothing of the sort.

Rather, it felt like she was floating. Like all the chains that had kept her tethered to the ground for so many years were finally falling away and allowing her wings to unfurl, lifting her up into the clear blue sky above. After years of fighting, lying, sacrificing, and enduring the stress and strain, for the first time, Margot had nothing to lose. The worst thing that could happen already had, and she was still alive. Still breathing. Still thinking, feeling, and wanting. This hadn't killed her, so whatever came next wouldn't either.

A sea of reporters awaited Margot as she stepped onto the podium, accompanied by an exhausted Michael, who stood a few feet away. She glanced out at the gathered crowd and it almost made her laugh. These press conferences had always felt so important. Another vital instrument in her arsenal, something to be controlled and directed. Now it all seemed a little silly. The whole world was waiting for Margot to speak out about the scandal.

Was there really nothing more important going on than who she had slept with in college? How ridiculous.

“My fellow Americans,” she began serenely, glancing out at the expectant journalists gathered around her, “I will keep this brief. We are all aware of the controversy that has dominated public discourse these last few weeks, and I do not intend to add fuel to this fire. Suffice it to say that this matter has created a great deal of difficulty, and has compromised my ability to effectively perform the duties of a presidential candidate.”

There was a smattering of muffled murmurs from the reporters who scribbled down every word hungrily, desperate for more details. Margot merely smiled graciously and continued.

“Therefore, with regret and much consideration, and after careful deliberation with my staff and my party,” she continued, “I have decided that it is time to step aside. I have served this country for a long time, and I believe that America needs strong, honest leadership to ensure that we remain a safe, prosperous, and peaceful country. This presidential race has been marred by scandal and controversy, and for the sake of the integrity of our great democracy, such distractions have no place. My sincere hope is that this decision brings forth a calmer, more reflective conversation about the challenges facing us, and how best to navigate the difficult choices ahead. Thank you.”

Silence fell. It lasted barely a second. The next, pandemonium broke out. Margot stepped aside, and Michael rushed in to field the storm of questions now being hurled at them. She observed the chaos for a moment, then turned away, smiling sadly to herself. Security escorted her back out of the building, through the underground garage, and into a vehicle waiting to drive her back to her hotel. The whole time, that strange, calm relief persisted.

This was the right thing to do. Bittersweet, certainly, but right. Only two weeks remained until Election Day. Even if Margot had wanted to, and she wasn't sure she had, there was no way to recover from this scandal before then. Might as well bow

out gracefully and let the party desperately try to pivot. It wouldn't work, of course. There wasn't time. After all of this, Election Day would be almost anticlimactic. There was no real contest now.

Maybe that should have made Margot feel bad. Guilty. It didn't, though. She had devoted her whole life to the party's causes. But the moment this had come out, the majority of them had turned her backs on her. Most of their employees had resigned, and William had taken off to Vermont to spend time with Tom--making it very clear that he would be filing for divorce. Again, Margot was unsurprised. They had only ever been useful to each other, and now, they weren't. The end of a business partnership. Simple as that. None of these people mattered. None of them were her friends. She had always known that.

The only person who truly cared was waiting at that hotel. Once Margot got there, she strode past the concierge without a second glance, heading directly for the elevators. Her phone buzzed relentlessly, so she picked it up, arched her eyebrows, and switched it off. Let the world sort itself out. Her whole life had been dedicated to serving it, to fulfilling its expectations, and to curating everything about herself to reflect what the world had expected of her. Well, Margot no longer cared. It was time to live a little.

Opening the door to the suite, she stopped short when she saw Francesca standing near the window, turning her head as Margot entered. Those gorgeous dark eyes sparkled, and her lips curved into the most breathtaking smile Margot had ever seen. For a moment, they simply looked at each other, drinking each other in appreciatively, until finally, Margot dropped her bag on the ground and hurried across the room. She pulled Francesca into her arms, pressing their bodies together and kissing her fervently. Francesca eagerly returned the kiss, winding her fingers into Margot's hair. They melted together perfectly, fitting together like two pieces of a puzzle.



“That was brave,” Francesca gasped between kisses, pulling back briefly to catch her breath, grinning at Margot affectionately. “They're going to tear you apart now, you know?”

“Mm,” Margot nodded, brushing her nose against Francesca's. “They already were. The difference is, I don't have to care about it anymore.”

Francesca chuckled softly, tangling her fingers in Margot's hair and gently stroking the back of her neck with her nails. “Are you sure you're all right?” Francesca murmured as she caressed her cheek. “Your entire career was just annihilated on the national stage.”

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Margot hummed contentedly, leaning into Francesca's touch as her hands slid over her hips. "I don't know," she said thoughtfully. "Maybe when things settle down, I'll have an existential crisis and cry myself to sleep for a few weeks. Right now, though, I'm good. And anyway, it's not like I'm leaving politics behind for good, is it?"

"You aren't?" Francesca grinned teasingly. "Well, that's fortunate. Since, you know, I happen to be running for president and all."

Margot giggled, pinching Francesca playfully in the side and leaning in close to place a trail of kisses along Francesca's jawline. She inhaled deeply, reveling in the soft skin and natural, intoxicating scent. This was still a dangerous game they were playing. The election was so close now, and despite current polls, Francesca's numbers could still plummet if this came out. Yet the temptation to allow themselves this indulgence was too enticing to resist. They needed to keep their relationship secret for the time being, until they figured out their next steps and what the future held, but Margot had come to relish these stolen moments away from prying eyes more than anything she'd ever experienced before.

She had fallen fast and hard, and there was no going back. When she had walked away from the press conference downstairs, it wasn't resignation that had flooded her veins with icy calm, but certainty. However uncertain and frightening this whole situation was, Margot wanted to experience it. To let herself discover who she could be outside the role she had crafted for herself all those years ago. And she wanted the woman in her arms now to be there by her side while she did it.

"So what does all this mean for you?" Francesca asked, gazing down at Margot with warm affection in her eyes. "Going forward, I mean. What comes next?"

“Down the line? I don't know yet,” Margot considered, pausing for a moment as she idly ran her fingertips along Francesca's collarbone, then smirked and met her companion's deep brown gaze. “Right now? You, me, and bed, darlin'--how does that sound?”

Francesca laughed softly and leaned down to kiss her again, nipping Margot's bottom lip gently before releasing it. Margot moaned encouragingly, sliding her hands underneath the hem of Francesca's blouse to touch her bare skin. Smiling against Margot's mouth, Francesca moved her hands to the zipper in the back of Margot's dress, tugging it down slowly with tantalizing restraint. Margot pulled back an inch to shimmy out of the light blue garment, letting it fall to the floor, leaving her clad only in a matching white bra and underwear.

“God, you're stunning,” Francesca breathed, as she gazed at Margot adoringly.

Margot stretched languidly, lifting her arms above her head to show off her body. Smirking, she slowly trailed her hands down the length of her body and rested them on her hips. Arching her eyebrows at Francesca suggestively, Margot smiled teasingly. “Well, what are you going to do about?” she asked mischievously.

With a low chuckle, Francesca cupped Margot's ass in her hands, pulling her closer as she kissed her passionately. The heat of Francesca's mouth ignited an eager spark within Margot. It started low in her core, quickly growing and burning, soon consuming every fiber of her being. It was like Margot was twenty-two again, full of excitement and wonderment, unrestrained by all the rules and boundaries that had held her down for so long. Free to take what she wanted, to explore her body and senses, and to learn the mysteries hidden inside of her without shame or guilt.

Margot eagerly pushed Francesca toward the hotel bedroom, pushing her blazer off her shoulders as they kissed messily, neither caring about finesse or elegance now. Just lust, desire, and raw need. Francesca stumbled backward onto the bed, dragging

Margot down on top of her, and they ended up in a tangled mess of limbs--tongues intertwining while Margot unbuttoned her shirt frantically, tossing the restricting material away. Beneath it was nothing but flawless, smooth skin and a black bra concealing beautifully round breasts. Margot took a moment just to marvel at the sight, licking her lips hungrily. God, how had she denied herself this all these years?

A whimper escaped her as Francesca gently dragged her nails along her bare back. Deft fingers unhooked the clasp of her bra, which was pulled loose swiftly and tossed aside impatiently. Francesca slid her hands down over Margot's hips and held her firmly in place, then leaned her head down to swirl her tongue over one of her nipples. Margot moaned appreciatively, tangling her fingers in her lover's hair and pulling her closer.

An electric wave of pleasure surged through her, leaving every muscle tense and thrumming with anticipation. Her thighs tightened around the other woman instinctively, her hips beginning to move of their own volition, grinding against Francesca's strong thigh. A familiar pressure was building up low in her belly, pulsing eagerly. Moaning again, Margot tilted her head back and arched her spine, silently urging Francesca to increase the friction between their bodies.

Francesca looked up with a devilish grin, then moved to flip their positions. Suddenly, Margot was on her back for the first time while Francesca hovered over her, kissing her like it was the only thing keeping her alive. Her hands moved confidently and dexterously over Margot's curves, touching each spot that made her shiver and whine eagerly.

Those glorious lips caressed her collarbones, moving down over the curve of her breasts, while a firm hand traveled down to her panties and slipped them down off her hips. Teasing fingertips grazed her clit, drawing slow circles, sliding down and teasing between her labia and eliciting another breathy moan from Margot. Her grip on Francesca's head tightened, fingers twisting in silky-soft hair, and she bit down on

her lower lip to stifle another helpless cry.

The ache was becoming intolerable now. It built higher and higher, radiating through her body, spreading and intensifying until her vision swam with brilliant lights, stars bursting behind her closed eyelids. When two long fingers sank into her, curling skillfully upward and pressing firmly into her G spot, she gasped loudly and rocked her hips urgently. As Francesca continued to tease and torment, Margot could no longer stay quiet. Wild, shameless moans and cries spilled out of her freely now. Every inch of her was alight, tingling and pulsing with desire, her hips bucking against Francesca's hand desperately. She couldn't get enough. Nothing would ever be enough, not now that she'd felt this.

Francesca groaned quietly in appreciation of this loss of control, watching Margot writhe under her touch with hungry eyes. As she added another finger and continued to thrust steadily inside Margot, varying the pace and force until Margot was whimpering incoherently.

Margot watched as Francesca scooted down the bed and her dark head moved down to join her right hand between Margot's legs.

She dipped her head taking Margot's clitoris in her mouth. Margot could almost feel it swelling appreciatively in Francesca's warm mouth as Francesca's fingers continued to fill her.

She felt her orgasm building deep within her, she knew there was no going back now. It was so long since she could remember ever opening herself up and letting someone fuck her like this. And it felt so damn exquisite.

Suddenly, it felt like her entire being contracted and focused solely on the incredible, aching pressure where her body was joined with Francesca's. She couldn't contain it any longer, couldn't think, could scarcely even breathe. She shattered into a million

sparkling pieces, Francesca's name on her lips, as all that pent-up ecstasy and craving spilled out in an explosive wave, drowning her senses in white noise and blurring out her surroundings completely. Margot's eyes fluttered shut as she rode out the waves of ecstasy crashing over her with reckless abandon, surrendering completely to the intoxicating rush of pleasure.

It didn't stop there. Francesca's pace slowed and she raised her head and pulled her fingers out of Margot's pussy, but didn't remove contact altogether. Instead, she moved her thumb to Margot's clitoris, moving in gentle, patient circles. In a daze, Margot slowly opened her eyes, gazing at her lover dreamily through heavy lids. Their eyes met, and they stared at each other intensely for a long moment, sharing an understanding without needing words. She breathed slowly and let herself relax again, and after a few moments of slow, careful coaxing, Margot found the pressure starting to build once more.

Francesca grinned and pulled back, but only enough to lower herself onto the floor between Margot's legs, gently pushing her thighs wide open. She licked and sucked Margot's labia greedily before diving between them. The tip of Francesca's tongue lapped over her teasingly, causing Margot to gasp sharply and arch her back slightly off the bed. Her fingers clawed at the sheets, balling them in her fists as she tried to ground herself, while another wave of euphoria swept through her.

It felt so different from anything she'd experienced before. More intense, more sensuous, more satisfying, in ways she had never dared imagine possible, now that she was no longer bound by her fear of judgment or failure. Not a single ounce of self-consciousness remained, nor did the gnawing anxiety about her actions and appearances that had been constantly present for far too long. Just pure, unbridled, blissful lust. Desire for her companion, but also for life. For freedom. For the endless possibilities that stretched out ahead of her.

Margot lost track of time as they explored each other, enjoying every exquisite detail

of one another's bodies, savoring every brush of fingers against skin, every sigh and gasp, every giggle and moan. The dreary October afternoon had been transformed into something magical and wondrous. It was their little slice of paradise, away from the chaos swirling around the rest of the world. Whatever happened afterward, whatever the cost might end up being, they had this moment, here and now, and it was perfect.

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## FRANCESCA

Loud cheers and applause erupted throughout the room as the results from Illinois were finalized on the enormous screen at the front of the room. That all but sealed it—the outcome was inevitable at this point and everyone knew it. Despite the opposition's desperate, last-ditch scrambling during the last three weeks to present James Lockwood, an aging military veteran and former Louisiana congressman, as a viable alternative, it was obvious from the start that Francesca's opponent wouldn't stand a chance. The unfortunate scandal had irreparably dented the swing voters' faith in the party's credibility, and combined with Francesca's more youthful image and passionate following, this was shaping up to be a landslide.

With a congenial grin, Francesca leaned back in her seat, soaking it all up. Her team was celebrating around her, clinking glasses of champagne and laughing enthusiastically. This was it. All their hard work over the last few years, all those interviews, rallies, speeches, debates, campaigns, fundraising events, and endless hours spent slaving away over drafts of proposals and laws had been worth it.

For Francesca, it wasn't quite sinking in yet. At some point, her brain would catch up and the reality of this would hit her. Perhaps it wouldn't fully register for a while longer. Maybe not until Lockwood called her at some point to concede, and perhaps not even until after the inauguration in January. Right now, all Francesca could do

was to look around in stunned, amused disbelief--unable to truly comprehend that she had achieved this wildest of dreams.



*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

Granted, the way it had happened wasn't entirely what she had envisioned. And in some ways, the victory didn't sit quite right. Margot was still in hiding, reeling from the shock of having her most private, firmly-kept secrets broadcast to the entire nation on every medium imaginable. Margot's career had been destroyed, probably for good.

Still, somehow, whenever the women spoke, and especially when they managed to steal a moment together, Margot seemed oddly at peace with that. Disappointed, certainly, and a little confused about what came next. Occasionally angry and distraught, but still not entirely hopeless. There was an optimistic curiosity to her now, an eager, energetic fascination for exploring this newfound freedom. Margot laughed a lot, too. Genuinely and whole-heartedly, not in that charming, silvery, media-trained chuckle she had performed for most of her professional life.

The last thing Francesca had expected at the start of this election cycle was to find herself falling in love with Margot Smith, perhaps the most dangerous viper that Washington D.C. had ever seen. But that was exactly what had happened, and the woman she had discovered hidden beneath Margot's façade of chilly, ruthless ambition and calculated demeanor was utterly captivating.

It wasn't just an attraction, although that was undeniably strong. The two of them understood each other, so perhaps it wasn't all that surprising. After all, they had devoted their lives to achieving the same dream, had made sacrifices and had worked tirelessly to make it come true. And now that Margot had relinquished that dream for herself, she seemed entirely happy to dedicate herself instead to supporting Francesca's pursuit of it. In secret, at least for now. The last thing Margot needed was a new onslaught of derogatory headlines about her personal life. The public would

figure that out in time, though. Once the dust cleared.

“Frankie!” Juliet exclaimed suddenly, breaking through Francesca's daydreaming and grabbing her arm, jolting her back to reality. “We've got Lockwood on the phone. He's ready to call it.”

“Yeah?” Francesca answered, trying to sound as excited about this news as the others surrounding her. She was thrilled too, of course, but her brain couldn't quite process the situation yet. It was like living in a strange fog—feeling numb and dulled to anything outside of her immediate reach. “All right. I'll take it in the conference room.”

She made her way out of the main hall where her team had set up base and headed into a smaller side room, closing the door behind her and picking up the receiver. Taking a deep breath to steady herself, she lifted it to her ear. On the other end of the line, the clear, measured voice of James Lockwood sounded.

“Senator Thurston,” the older gentleman said calmly. “Congratulations are in order, I understand.”

“Thank you, sir,” Francesca replied evenly. “This has been an extraordinary campaign, and it's been an honor to have run alongside you these last few weeks.”

The ten minutes that followed were overly formal and polite, both careful with their choice of words to avoid giving away any sign of frustration on his part or smugness on hers. She had always imagined these concession calls to be terribly awkward for everyone involved, and now that she was in this position herself, her assumption appeared to have been accurate. The man was gracious and humble, however, and that helped to ground her.

This was, in some strange way, how politics should be. Two people who both

believed in their causes and were willing to fight tooth and nail for them, but who also believed that the events leading up to the election happened in the best interests of their country, and they respected that understanding in each other. After all the dramatics of the last few months, good and bad, straightforward integrity felt comforting. Things were complicated now, and they would only be more so as Francesca pursued the most important, challenging job of her life. However, they didn't have to be that way. Somewhere inside the tangled mess, there was still room for respect and mutual understanding. Now it was Francesca's job to try to bring that to the forefront.

Once the conversation concluded and the formalities had been completed, Francesca hung up and headed back to the larger space where her team were once more hopping frantically into action. They were calling the networks, preparing the stage downstairs to address the nation, and coordinating press releases, website updates, tweets, emails, and every other little piece necessary to manage such a monumental moment. And in forty-five minutes, Francesca would go down there and deliver her first speech as president-elect.

The realization hit her like an avalanche. A massive wave of exhilaration, panic, anticipation, doubt, excitement, terror, and giddy disbelief slammed into her chest all at once. Swaying slightly, Francesca stumbled back, leaning against a table behind her and placing a trembling hand on her heart. She sucked in a sharp breath, willing herself not to pass out from sheer incredulity. One minute she'd felt completely fine and now she was struggling just to stay upright. With another shuddering breath, Francesca sank into one of the nearby chairs and closed her eyes, taking several long, slow breaths to calm her racing heart. Good God. This was really happening.

A soft, tentative hand landed on her shoulder, shaking her out of her brief stupor. Francesca blinked her eyes open and turned toward the person beside her. Her eyebrows shot up, startled when she saw who it was. For a long moment, all Francesca could do was stare up in amazement at Margot, who was smiling at her

with an affectionate grin while squeezing her shoulder. Countless pairs of eyes darted toward them curiously. Her siblings exchanged knowing looks, but everyone else seemed utterly perplexed.

“Senator,” Margot said with a coy smile, winking at her. “I wanted to come down here and offer my congratulations in person. After all, if not for me, you might not even be standing in this room right now. You're welcome.”

The playful southern drawl made Francesca laugh heartily. With that, the people around them seemed to relax, too, recognizing that their former adversary wasn't here to stir up some last-minute trouble. Smiling brightly at Margot, she reached out and grabbed the older woman's right hand, shaking it vigorously as she stood up. Their eyes met, and a spark of electricity coursed between them. Honestly, Francesca was impressed that Margot had come here. She certainly hadn't wanted to when they spoke earlier today.

Now, though, Margot was staring at her with unabashed pride in her sky-blue eyes, impervious to anyone else's judgment. Coming down here after all the problems she'd caused and everything that had transpired over the last few months was an act of tremendous courage. The people around them might not recognize that right now, because they were still holding on to grudges and suspicions, but Francesca knew, and her admiration and affection for the woman in front of her surged even higher as a result.

“Hah. Thank you, I think,” Francesca replied lightly, “and thank you for one hell of a challenge, Ms. Smith. It certainly hasn't been dull.”

Margot returned her chuckle, grinning at her wickedly. “No, it certainly has not, Senator Thurston,” she acknowledged. “Now don't let me keep you, darlin'. You've got work to do.”

With one last lingering touch of her fingers against the back of Francesca's palm, Margot turned around and left as quickly as she had arrived, sweeping away gracefully. Leaving an air of mystery behind. Only the two of them knew that she was staying upstairs tonight in this very hotel, waiting for Francesca so they could celebrate her win privately. The former congresswoman had always loved theatrics, though. Couldn't resist one last opportunity to rile people up. Bless her heart.

“Uh, what the hell?” Juliet remarked from somewhere to Francesca's right, causing her to turn toward her friend again with a bemused expression. “Did that snake just waltz in here looking all buddy-buddy and cheerful? Seriously?”

“Don't worry about it, Jules,” Francesca replied, clapping the younger woman on the back. “I'll explain later. Right now, we have things to do and places to be. Let's go, guys. How are we on the speech?”

A loud cheer rose up again, filling the large, lavishly decorated event hall with energy, motivation, and a healthy dose of infectious optimism. There were already reports of huge celebrations breaking out across the country. Thousands of supporters gathered on every street corner, dancing, singing, cheering, and waving flags. Across social media, hashtags were trending nationwide, celebrating her win, expressing enthusiasm and excitement about a more progressive future.

In the coming days, these small victories would inevitably become overshadowed by all sorts of serious, complicated issues, but for now, they could bask in the glow of this enormous accomplishment. A bright and hopeful note to begin on.

The next thirty minutes were a chaotic whirlwind of rushing back and forth between rooms, shaking hands, taking calls, running through last-minute notes for the upcoming speech. As the minutes ticked by, Francesca found herself becoming more and more anxious. It had been a long time since she'd felt nervous about giving a speech. And this was what she did best, going out on a stage and delivering powerful,

impassioned words intended to sway hearts and minds in her favor.

Tonight, though, it was different. As her friends, family, and employees surrounded her, gently steering Francesca toward her destination, she felt a rush of excitement. The whole world was watching. Millions of eyes glued to screens around the globe. Every news network would carry her remarks live, and every politician and leader would study them closely. At the end of the night, the result would be her legacy, an embodiment of everything she wanted to stand for and achieve. As of tonight, she was no longer an idealistic, ambitious Massachusetts senator. From now on, she was the future President of the United States.

This was it. This was everything Francesca had worked toward, everything she had lived and breathed and sacrificed for. It wasn't all up to her, of course, not by a long shot. But right now, as soon as she stepped out on that stage, her life—and the lives of millions of American citizens—would change forever. All she could do was hope that it would be for the better.

The curtains were pulled back. She held her breath. The crowd roared. This was Francesca's moment. And with one last step forward, she claimed it.

## EPILOGUE

### MARGOT 3 YEARS LATER

*Source Creation Date: July 12, 2025, 5:18 pm*

The Rose Garden stretched out before Margot in all its early autumn glory. This time of the morning, the sunlight broke through the tree branches in golden shards, illuminating the rich red and purple hues of the flowers and leaves below. Behind her, the white columns and tall windows of the West Wing shone brilliantly under a clear blue sky. Margot breathed in deeply, relishing the crisp September air. There were worse ways to begin a day than with a stroll through such a gorgeous landscape. She had always envisioned herself in the iconic office overlooking it, but over the last few years, she had found herself rather enjoying these frequent visits while someone else did all the hard work.

In truth, an early retirement was treating her well so far. Of course, Margot was still busy, occupied, and in high demand with every organization and think tank vying for her expertise and advice, but it was all on her terms now. No more late nights agonizing over legislation details, enduring exhausting fundraisers full of brash, boastful old men and obnoxious celebrities, or pandering to donors or constituents over the phone. And most of all, no more hiding. After years of carefully curated masks, roles, and personas, finally being herself--freely and openly--was still such a novel, thrilling experience. Margot savored the luxury.

Partway through her leisurely stroll around the manicured lawn, the familiar shape of a woman in a light gray pantsuit moved into her field of view, crossing the yard and heading straight for her. The ebony hair had streaks of grey in it now from the stress, but Francesca was still radiant, exuding vitality, charisma, and strength. Her stride was confident, her posture impeccable, and her gaze alert and sharp. Even after three years together, Margot felt her heart flutter as their eyes met. This remarkable, awe-inspiring woman, breathtaking woman was hers, and the knowledge never ceased to fill her with delight.

“Good morning, Madame President,” she purred as Francesca approached, lifting her head to receive a gentle kiss on the lips. “How is the most powerful woman in the world doing on this lovely morning?”

Francesca snorted softly with amusement, wrapping one arm around Margot's waist and stroking her side tenderly. “Exhausted,” she sighed, brushing their noses together briefly as she glanced sideways toward the building behind them. “And ready to go taste some cakes. Come on. We've only got two hours, so we'd better get moving.”

Margot laughed and nodded. “Mm, always so busy,” she purred, entwining her fingers with Francesca's as they turned back and headed toward the main entrance. “The lady from Bake Bliss just called to confirm that they're all ready. I think she's a little scared of you, darlin', so you might want to tone down the intimidation factor a bit.”

Another snort of laughter escaped her partner, who looked down at Margot playfully as they walked side by side, arms hooked. “Me?” Francesca replied incredulously. “Intimidating? Not in the slightest. You're the one she needs to be scared of. That poor florist from last week was practically in tears by the time you finished interrogating him.”

“Oh, please,” Margot retorted, rolling her eyes. “Excuse me for wanting my wedding to be perfect. For what we're paying them, they can at least get the color scheme right!”

“You really need to find somewhere else to put all this obsessive perfectionist energy, sweetheart,” Francesca teased as they stepped into the car that was waiting to take them to the cake tasting.

“Oh, I will, as soon as we kick off your re-election campaign. Don't worry,” Margot assured her playfully. “Someone needs to make sure your staff gets organized enough to pull this off. You got lucky last time, Frankie. Your next opponent might not be so



easily distracted by how sexy your voice is when you get all excited about fiscal policy.”

Francesca laughed at that, leaning back into the plush leather seat of their car as the driver pulled out of the parking lot and onto the road. She draped her arm loosely over Margot's shoulder, absentmindedly playing with the delicate gold necklace she had given Margot as an anniversary gift last October. It glittered in the morning sunlight as it hung loosely around her elegant neck.

“We've got a lot of things to deal with before that,” Francesca reminded her with a sigh. “Are you sure you're ready for us to announce this? It's not too late to postpone it a while longer, you know.”

Margot paused thoughtfully, tilting her head as she glanced out the window. They hadn't yet publicly confirmed anything about their relationship. That was a surefire way to distract from legislative goals and complicate negotiations. Oh, they were seen together often enough and it was no secret that Margot visited the White House almost weekly, but it was all rumor and speculation for the time being. That had worked just fine. After a lifetime spent in the spotlight, it had been a nice change of pace.

However, the time was fast approaching for Francesca to announce her re-election bid. If they were going to do this for another four years, the chances of them being able to keep everything private were slim. Anyway, neither one of them really wanted to keep it a secret. They were getting married in the summer, now that Margot and William had successfully completed their divorce proceedings after countless rounds in court.

Margot finally felt ready to step back into the public eye and face whatever criticism, anger, confusion, and general unpleasantness might befall her because of it. In truth, letting their relationship be public was a much bigger risk for Francesca, who stood to lose the support of many progressives who still considered Margot a symbol of

everything they fought against. Over the last few years, she had spoken out against her former allies several times, and now proudly supported numerous policies that Francesca spearheaded. Margot's image had certainly softened in the eyes of many people. There would always be those who rejected her, of course, but on the whole, it would likely be fine.

Whatever happened, though, they would weather the storm together. That was what Francesca kept saying, and after a lot of hemming and hawing, Margot had decided to believe her. She had spent too long refusing to take risks, or to step outside her comfort zone. Now, she wanted to live freely and authentically, and this was the final hurdle for her. The last great unknown in this new chapter of her life.

"Yes," Margot said, turning back to her fiancée with a warm smile. "I'm sure. I love you and I want the whole damn world to know it. I won't ever let anyone hold the truth of whom I love over my head again."

"Good," Francesca murmured, as she leaned closer and captured Margot's lips in a tender kiss. "Thank goodness that woman is safely in jail. I still can't believe her slimeball lawyer tried to get her acquitted, even with all the evidence of extortion."

Margot nodded, rolling her eyes. She rarely thought about Cassandra these days—or Jessica, as her real name turned out to be. A rather unassuming middle-aged housewife from Iowa whom Margot still couldn't recall having ever been involved with. That drunken night in college was still a blank in her memory, which was perhaps just as well. Still, the entire ordeal had been extremely traumatic and disruptive. Margot's reputation and career were permanently tarnished, but she had managed to move on and find peace somewhere along the way.

So had William. He'd moved to Vermont with Tom and they were happy, from what she'd heard. She and William weren't exactly on friendly terms anymore. Not exactly antagonistic either, but he certainly wasn't getting invited to the wedding. They'd never really had much in common. How strange it was now, to be sharing her life

with someone she actually liked, wanted, and respected. Why hadn't she been doing this all along?

“I'm just glad that's all over,” she sighed, settling her head onto Francesca's shoulder with contentment. “When can I start calling myself 'First Lady' officially, by the way? Because I am absolutely dying to.”

A low chuckle rumbled deep within Francesca's chest. “After the wedding, I think,” she replied. “I do think marriage is a requirement for that title. Half my staff already refer to you that way, though, and as far as I'm concerned, you already are. First and only. I love you, Margot.”

Margot let out a brilliant laugh and wrapped her arms around Francesca's neck, pulling her in for a deep, passionate kiss. Their tongues slid over one another, teasing and exploring, while their lips pressed together in a hungry, insatiable embrace. Every time they kissed, it felt like the first time. A wave of pure, blissful relief washed over Margot, as well as the sheer elation of being free to kiss the woman she loved without holding anything back. Now that she had discovered the freedom that came with this kind of happiness and contentment, Margot wouldn't be satisfied with anything less ever again.

Eventually, the car stopped, and as Margot pulled away reluctantly, the door opened to reveal a secret service agent waiting patiently to escort them inside the bakery. Margot and Francesca exchanged glances, both a little flushed and disheveled. They grinned widely at each other, their eyes shining with love and amusement at one another.

Smirking, Margot rose to her feet and smoothed out the wrinkles in her dress, then stepped out of the vehicle with confidence and grace, flipping her hair back over her shoulder; it was much blonder these days. Francesca followed behind her closely, gazing at her fondly. Instinctively, Margot reached for her hand. It didn't matter who saw them now. In a week, the whole world would know, and the very last secret

Margot had kept would be out in the open.

From now on, there would only be freedom. Freedom, hope, and love.