



Bodyman

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Category: LGBT+

Description: The first time I got on my knees for President Ashley, it was the night of his inauguration...

And I was only doing my job... helping him remove his shoes.

I'm Lieutenant Commander Kenan Harper, the president's trusted valet. His loyal aide. His bodyman...

And the fool who's been in love with Garner Ashley since long before I took this job.

If I had my way, I'd be so much more than his employee, but to say that would be impossible would be the understatement of the century. Garner might be the first openly gay president, but the world's not ready for a gay First Gentleman, and Garner's never looked at me with anything but professional courtesy...

Until suddenly, he does.

The first touch between us sparks years of longing into a blaze so bright and wild, neither of us can deny our feelings any longer. But when a relationship is this forbidden, this career-ending, this... world-changing... both of us will have choices to make.

Will I remain in the shadows as the president's bodyman... or stand out and proud by Garner's side as the one he loves?

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CHAPTER ONE

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER KENAN HARPER, BODYMAN TO THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

The first time I got on my knees for President Ashley, it was the night of the inauguration. He'd gone back to the Oval Office after making an appearance at one of the balls and had fallen asleep on the sofa. Considering he'd already been awake and working for over twenty hours by then, I wasn't surprised he'd dozed off.

I'd only been on the job for five days at that point, but I'd spent the entire month between my separation from the Navy and my first day as the president's bodyman researching what the hell a bodyman was supposed to do.

As a personal aide to the president, it was my job to... pretty much do whatever the man wanted. I was tasked with helping him dress, fetching him coffee, making sure he was properly fed and hydrated, finding missing items or ensuring he had what he needed for trips and meetings, and basically anything else he needed done in order to keep from being distracted from the most important job in the world.

So I had to assume it meant helping him get much-needed sleep when he dozed off on the presidential sofa.

But when I began slipping off his formal wing tips, he jerked awake with a grunt. Irish-green eyes peered at me through inky lashes, and I tried to keep any emotion off my face, even though I was suddenly flooded with it.

“Kenan?” His voice was hoarse from sleep and exhaustion. “Sorry... Commander Harper . What time is it?”

“Three a.m., sir. Would you prefer to move to the residence?”

He sat up and rubbed both hands over his face. A lock of hair stood up on the back of his head, and my fingers itched with the need to smooth it. Instead, I kept my eyes focused on the rug under me as I stood up.

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess that would be a good idea. I have an early meeting at...” His voice trailed off.

“Seven,” I said before clearing my throat. “I’ll make sure you’re up.”

He glanced at me before standing. “That won’t be necessary. I’ll set an alarm.”

Those were the early days, when I’d still stupidly thought I could keep some distance by living in my own apartment. Before the sheer demands and long hours of the job had necessitated me finally caving and accepting a bedroom in the staff section of the residence.

I’d gotten on my knees for President Ashley countless times during that first term, when we were both new and unsure of ourselves.

But none of them were for the reason I’d secretly wanted.

No, that didn’t happen until four and a half years later.

CHAPTER TWO

GARNER ASHLEY, PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

I'd known before I'd accepted my sister's suggestion it was a bad idea.

Kenan Harper had been her best friend growing up, the quintessential boy next door who mowed lawns for extra cash, helped at his dad's hardware store, and dreamed about following his favorite uncle into the Navy. Even though I'd been six years older than Kenan, I'd still gotten used to seeing him around. He and Cat were inseparable, to the point I'd expected the two of them to wind up together one day.

But then Cat had gone to law school, and Kenan had joined the Navy and moved to California. I'd been so busy building my own legal career before accidentally entering politics I hadn't given the beautiful boy from Brownsburg, Indiana, a second thought.

Until Cat had recommended him for the position of my personal aide after the election.

"This position is usually filled by a kid," I'd explained, thinking it was a joke. "Not a lieutenant commander in the Navy."

"He's getting out. And he doesn't want to move home yet. His dad's pressuring him to come take over at the shop, and he's not ready. This would be perfect."

"Cat, he'd be fetching me drinks and... I don't know, picking up dry cleaning. It's

long hours and low pay. Trust me, he wouldn't want the job."

She'd met my eyes with a familiar look of determination. "He needs this. And you need someone you can trust. Besides, he's already got security clearances, and his military record is impeccable."

"Surely he's married by now. His wife wouldn't want?—"

"Not married. No wife. Hell, I think the closest he ever came to a serious relationship was when he dated Brianna Walters senior year. It lasted three months. He broke up with her before leaving for Purdue."

I'd blown out a breath. The last time I'd seen Kenan was after Cat's college graduation. I'd barely recognized the man who came over for backyard burgers. He was tall and broad, sexy as hell with muscles and sun-bronzed skin.

I'd immediately wanted him, and I'd had to force myself to look away out of fear he'd be able to see my intense attraction. The last thing I'd wanted was to make things weird for my sister or him.

But if he was straight, maybe that would tamp down my attraction. Hell, maybe enough time had passed that I would see him in a different light. And Cat was right about trust. If there was one thing I'd learned in my fifteen years in politics, it was that trust was incredibly rare.

And I trusted Kenan Harper with my life.

I vowed to keep things professional and at least interview the man. If I still felt the same attraction to him, I'd politely pass on his application.

But then he'd shown up for the interview, and I hadn't been able to look away. He

was tall, taller than me even, and he had a silent strength I'd never noticed before. His eyes held so many secrets I was desperate to seek them out, to get him to confide in me, if only to share his burdens for a while.

So much for keeping things professional.

I'd hired him on the spot.

CHAPTER THREE

KENAN

Keeping things professional with Garner Ashley was damned near impossible.

I'd had a crush on the man since I was twelve fucking years old and he was an eighteen-year-old Adonis. Not only was he beautiful like some kind of fairy-tale prince, but he was also smart as hell. He was heading off to the University of Chicago on a full-merit scholarship, and all I could think about at the time was that I wouldn't get to see him at Catherine's house anymore.

During his years in college, I'd heard bits and pieces of his accomplishments. I'd learned the most scandalous and enticing detail of all. Garner Ashley was gay . Not experimenting, not bi, but actually full-on gay and not even a little apologetic about it.

I hadn't known it was possible for someone to be more perfect than he already was, but to hear about him living his true identity out loud, confidently and naturally, made him even more attractive to me during a time when my own sexual identity scared the shit out of me.

It was Garner's own success story, heard thirdhand through his sister, that inspired me to work my ass off in high school so I could leave Brownsburg for college and ultimately escape into the Navy.

Now, here I was, working with him practically around the clock as a glorified gopher.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

After four years of working together, we'd fallen into an easy routine. I woke him first thing in the morning and served at his pleasure in whatever capacity was necessary until the very end of his day. Early on, he'd argued with me, nearly begging me to clock out and go home, but then there'd been several days right away that had convinced both of us how unrealistic that was.

"Please, Kenan. I need to know you're getting some sleep," he'd said. It was one of the rare occasions he'd slipped and called me by my first name. "And I need to know you're not on the Washington streets in the middle of the night."

It had made the difference between me tossing and turning all night in my shitty studio apartment and me catching sound sleep knowing he was safely ensconced only one floor below me.

I worried about him all the time. President Garner Ashley was the first openly gay president, one of the few single presidents, and there were heaps of people who had strong feelings about both of those things.

He was a target for hate every single day.

It was one of the reasons I'd volunteered for the position when Catherine had told me about her fear. "What happens if someone that close to him betrays his trust? His privacy? What if they sell out a sensational story to the media?"

She'd been so worried about her big brother she'd asked if I'd known any young men who could be trusted to apply for the position.

It had taken me only a microsecond to understand this was the reason I'd processed out of the Navy. Fate had something else in store, something important and

meaningful.

Serving Garner Ashley, even in a position as low as his bodyman, had been more of an honor than my years in the Navy.

And it was never more true than the night everything changed between us.

CHAPTER FOUR

GARNER

Six months after my second inauguration, my team and I were just taking off to return home after a productive diplomatic trip to Brunei when we got the news about a coup attempt in Cedruaze. Tensions had been escalating in that part of Central America for a while, and we'd put special forces teams in place for just this eventuality. Air Force One quickly became a mobile command center as we strategized with the top military and State Department personnel to keep the situation from destabilizing the entire region.

We'd spent six intense hours watching it play out through our various intel sources while trying to manage the outcome and minimize casualties. Two of my own military advisors—who had a well-known ongoing feud—had disagreed about how to handle things, and when our delayed response to their urgent requests for direction had resulted in the loss of three members of the team, I'd felt the failure like a crushing blow.

It had taken all of my self-control to stay professional and continue managing the situation from afar until things were settled and the rebel forces had been securely neutralized. We had twelve hours left in flight, and I felt like we'd already been in the air for days. My chief of staff urged me to get some rest, knowing we'd be slammed from touchdown until all of the relevant teams had debriefed us back in the Situation Room.

One of the dueling military advisors whose disagreement had contributed to our

losses looked as upset as I felt. The other looked smug. He clapped a big hand on my shoulder. “We got ’em in the end, didn’t we? That’s what matters.”

I bit my teeth against an angry retort, my emotions riding higher than I could easily contain.

As I made my way out of the senior staff room and up to my private quarters, Commander Harper followed me on silent feet. I felt his strong presence behind me and wondered if I could make it to the bedroom and dismiss him before my raw emotions got the better of me and caused me to punch a wall or, worse, break down crying like a child.

“You, ah... you don’t need to come with me,” I began, already knowing how the conversation would go.

He remained silent.

“I’m fine,” I said, trying again. My nerves were shattered, and I couldn’t help but think of the phone calls I would have to make to the loved ones of the fallen soldiers.

“Yes, sir,” he murmured. His soft footsteps on the plush carpet never fell out of rhythm.

We reached the door to my bedroom and entered. Once he’d followed me in, the door clicked closed behind us.

“Dammit, Commander,” I snapped, my voice rough and angry. “I said I don’t need you!”

My hands shook, and my lips felt numb. I’d had to call the families of many military members in my four years in office, but none had felt so personal, so much... my

fault ... as these did. I was on the verge of doing the unthinkable—I could feel my eyes filling already—and I needed Kenan Harper to get the hell out of my presence so I could suffer my mortification alone.

When I didn't hear him open the door to leave, I spun around to snap at him again. He was closer than I expected, right behind me, in fact. So when I turned, my hip brushed the front of his suit pants, glancing off a muscled thigh.

Heat roared through me at the feel of his warm body so close.

CHAPTER FIVE

KENAN

There had been many times in the past four years I'd struggled to stay silent. Many times, I'd wanted to assert myself to defend or aid my president. But my job was to neither be seen nor heard. My job was to stand silently in the corner and wait to be needed.

So I'd done my damned job even as the two asshat blowhards had allowed their overinflated egos to interfere with the safety of a mission. Because of them, three good Marines had died. Because of them, my president felt like he'd single-handedly killed them himself.

And I couldn't stay quiet anymore.

"You did not do this," I said quietly.

Garner's eyes looked up at me, bright green and heartbreakingly shiny. "You saw what happened."

I nodded. Once. "Yes. I saw those fuckers cause good men to die. I saw them use their reputations against you. It was repugnant and fucking criminal."

As I spoke, his eyes widened in surprise. "Tell me what you really think, Commander."

We still stood too close. The brush of his hip against my soft cock had lit me up inside, and my body trembled with a familiar urge to touch him. My urge to comfort him, to distract him from his pain, was too strong to hold out much longer. “I think they took advantage of you in a moment of...”

“Weakness,” he spat. “Go ahead and say it. Everyone claimed my lack of military experience would be my downfall, and look what happened. They were right.”

“They were wrong,” I gritted out. “You’re the smartest person in that room, sir. And they all know it. But you’re also respectful of each team member’s own expertise. It was their responsibility to bring that expertise to bear and counsel you appropriately in a timely manner. They failed.”

“The buck stops here, Commander,” he muttered, seeming to deflate right in front of me.

“With all due respect, Mr. President, spare me the Trumanesque bullshit. Those Marines’ deaths were avoidable, but the mission they participated in wasn’t. They—and you—helped save the oppression of thousands of innocent people by stopping those rebels. If you’re going to assign blame, then you’d better assign credit too.”

He studied me, green eyes raking over my face. “Since when do you eschew opinions, Commander Harper?”

I considered keeping my mouth shut. I’d already said way too much.

When my voice came out, it was barely audible. “Since I can’t stand seeing you in pain.”

CHAPTER SIX

GARNER

It wasn't the first time I'd felt this incredible, thick tension crackle between the two of us. I remembered the night of my first inauguration when I'd awoken to see him carefully removing my shoes. He'd always been a gentle giant, but seeing him folded up at my feet, taking special care not to wake me, had reminded me just how sweet he could be.

Not once had he balked at being my personal aide, at having to deal with small, demeaning, or petty jobs, and he'd always done it with a respectful acceptance. Sometimes it had even seemed like an honor, like having to remove dirty lunch dishes from the corner of my desk was laudable and virtuous.

Kenan never acted like he was beneath the job.

Two months into my first term, he'd been standing behind me in the Situation Room while I'd been in tense discussions with several foreign governments over a piracy issue in the Gulf of Aden. I'd caught a terrible cold, and Kenan's job was to be on hand to make sure I had tissues, cough drops, remembered to take my medicine, etc.

Although he obviously hadn't been in uniform, one of the high-ranking military members in the meeting had recognized him when he'd entered the room after a break. Rear Admiral Acosta hadn't realized I was entering the room behind him after a quick trip to the men's room.

“Commander Harper,” he’d said with a smirk. “I’d heard you’d taken a role here at the White House, but I didn’t realize it was as an errand boy. Is that truly what you left the Navy for?”

Kenan had looked the man up and down before calmly addressing him. “Admiral Acosta, sir. Good to see you. In answer to your question, no. It isn’t what I left the Navy for, but it is my utmost honor to serve this president in any way that makes his job to our nation run more smoothly. I would imagine you feel the same way. Sir.”

I’d bit my lip against a smile. He’d looked so stoic, so completely unruffled, that I’d wanted to kiss him full on the lips just to see if I could get the man’s incessant neutral expression to crack.

The rear admiral had muttered something that sounded like reluctant agreement, and then I’d clapped the man on the shoulder.

“Appreciate it, Admiral Acosta. I’m happy to take all the help I can get.”

Instead of coughing my germs into his face like I’d wanted, I’d stepped back and moved closer to Kenan before lowering my voice just enough that it sounded private, but Rear Admiral Acosta could still hear me. “Commander Harper, someone from the NSA is going to deliver that global cryptography report later today. I told them to make sure it’s delivered directly to you. I’d like to review it this evening after dinner, and I’d like your expertise if you don’t mind.”

“Yes, sir. Of course.”

His eyes sparkled, and a muscle had flexed in his jaw, which had been the closest he came to expressing emotion in a room filled with important people.

It hadn’t been much, but I’d hoped it had been a reminder to this military blowhard

that Commander Kenan Harper was more than a lackey. He'd been a highly respected cryptologic warfare officer in the US Navy. And he was now one of the men seated closest to the top of the US military.

Commander Kenan Harper had the ear and trust of the president of the United States.

But sometimes I got the feeling he would have been happy enough simply being Garner Ashley's errand boy.

CHAPTER SEVEN

KENAN

I could see memories flashing across Garner's face. With him this close, I wondered if he, like me, remembered all the times we'd touched.

The times we'd gotten close over the previous four and a half years were imprinted on my brain. Imprinted on my skin.

I'd pulled his suit coat on and off countless times, trailing my fingertips over the warmth of his body through his shirt. I'd even tweezed two rogue eyebrow hairs right before he was scheduled for a sit-down interview with a well-known reporter. The show's hair and makeup process would take place in front of too many people, so the president had pulled me aside with a frantic plea for help in his private washroom.

I remembered stepping between his knees as he'd sat on the toilet lid looking up at me. The way the warm, dim lighting had caught in his hair and the way his Armani aftershave had mixed with his Harry's Redwood deodorant to make a scent purely his own.

It had filled the small space and seeped into my skin as I'd reached out with my left hand to cup the back of his head. "Hold still," I'd murmured as I leaned in closer to identify the hairs in question.

"Getting old," he'd muttered. "Like one of those old men whose eyebrows take on a life of their own."

I'd huffed out a laugh. "Yes. Geezer President. The absolute geezeriest."

Once I had the tweezer tips in just the right spot to pluck the first one, I hesitated for a microsecond. Causing this man pain, even the quickest, most insignificant pain like a plucked eyebrow, wasn't easy for me.

"Commander?"

"Mm," I'd said before clearing my throat and yanking the hair. I quickly placed my thumb over the spot and pressed in.

"What are you doing?"

"Conditioned pain modulation," I'd explained. "Overcoming one stimulus with another to confuse the receptors. Is it working?"

His green eyes had been particularly luminous that day as he'd peered up at me. "My receptors are definitely confused," he'd responded in a rough whisper.

Our eyes had locked together for a moment. The tension between us was as pervasive as the familiar and delicious scent of him.

I'd moved my thumb down from his eyebrow, tracing his temple, his cheek, his jawline. His eyes widened as my heart thundered in my chest, worrying about his reaction to my inappropriate intimacy.

Neither of us had spoken, but he'd shifted his knees until his legs bracketed mine. He'd lifted his hands from his lap and placed them on my hips. Our eyes had stayed together as I'd moved the tweezer to grasp the final misbehaving eyebrow hair.

"Have dinner with me tonight?" he'd asked, clearly surprising both of us. But then,

something in his expression had shuttered. “Sorry. Sorry. Forget I said that. Please.”

I’d clenched my jaw against the desire to argue with him, to demand he take back his take-back and let his original invitation stand.

In the end, it hadn’t mattered. Because halfway through the interview, we’d gotten the message about an incoming weather emergency in California that had derailed the rest of the president’s evening.

By the time everything had settled back into their normal routine, Garner had pretended that moment in the restroom had never happened.

And I’d gone back to biding my time.

CHAPTER EIGHT

GARNER

Since I can't stand seeing you in pain.

As the low hum of Air Force One's engines continued, I closed my eyes against the roughness of his voice. Kenan rarely spoke up, and he never gave me his opinion unless I'd specifically asked for it. He'd always made it clear to me he had strong feelings about his proper place as my bodyman, despite my encouragement for him to be more himself around me.

Knowing his emotions were strong enough to make him break his own rules tonight made my emotions even stronger.

"If you're nice to me, Commander," I croaked, "I won't be able to..."

My jaw trembled, and I clamped my teeth together tightly to stop it.

"Garner ." His voice was calmer now, smooth and reassuring. I couldn't remember the last time he'd said my name. Had I been in law school at the time? The sound of my name on his tongue was my undoing.

An ugly sound escaped my throat as I stepped forward and buried my face in his neck. I wasn't clearheaded enough to think about what I was doing, about how highly inappropriate it was, considering our positions. In that moment, Kenan was simply Kenan, an old family friend. Someone from back home who knew the real me, the

man without the intimidating title and impossible responsibilities.

He was a safe haven, and I needed him for that. Desperately.

His arms came around me quick and tight. He made soothing noises, murmuring words about how I was safe with him, that I could let it go. It was okay. I would be okay.

It wasn't okay, but for a few moments, I could let it out, the anguish and sorrow. The guilt. I knew it would be just us. I could trust him not to reveal my weakness to anyone else. Kenan Harper was a vault. He'd proven himself time and time again in his role as my personal aide.

I held on to him like he was a parachute thrown at my sternum as I was shoved bodily out of an airplane hatch.

He smelled both familiar and strange. The scent of his deodorant and shampoo was familiar, but I'd rarely been close enough to smell the musky scent of his skin after a long day.

I wanted more. I wanted to inhale it over and over until I was dizzy with it.

Kenan's hands moved up and down my back, strong and confident. Capable and constant.

I waited for the humiliation to come. It didn't.

"I'm sorry," I said, the words muffled against the hot skin of his neck. But they were lies. All lies. I wasn't sorry. And I didn't regret it. I'd wanted to hold him, be held by him, for a very long time. And now, I'd finally gotten to do it.

How could I ever let go?

One of his hands moved up into the back of my hair and cupped my head, holding me in place in case I suddenly felt the urge to pull away. How little he knew me if he thought there was a possibility of that happening.

“No sorries,” he said gruffly. “You’re so fucking strong, and you never let it out. Let it out now. Let it out with me.”

I stepped even closer, pressing my chest and stomach against his. My cock was already hardening from being this close to him, so I held my hips back to keep from embarrassing us both.

There had been moments during our time together I’d wondered if there could possibly be an attraction from his side, if maybe he was as interested in me as I was in him. But then I’d talked myself out of it. Even if he was willing, I wasn’t able.

I was his boss, for god’s sake. And not just his boss... I was the boss. The one whose reputation had to be above reproach. The man who couldn’t afford to be caught lusting after his personal aide.

I started to straighten up, to step back, but then I felt him shift.

And felt his own hard cock brush against mine.

CHAPTER NINE

KENAN

Garner Ashley was dominant in almost every aspect of his life. He was a strong, confident leader; an intelligent, capable attorney; a controlling, care-taking older brother; and a commanding president.

But in my fantasies, he was never dominant with me.

Now, here, when I'd finally gotten him in my arms, I could tell he was already unsure of himself. If I knew him well, and I was sure I did, he was beginning to panic.

And this time, it wasn't about the failed coup.

"Take a breath," I said firmly.

He tried pulling away, but I held strong.

"Stop thinking," I growled, annoyed at how predictable he was.

"I... I need to... we shouldn't..." He struggled again, so I let him pull back, but I kept my hands on his hips so he couldn't go far.

"Talk to me," I urged in a low voice.

"I've put you in an unthinkable position. I'm sorry."

I met his eyes, verdant green and deep as the Mariana Trench. “Do I look like I’m somewhere I don’t want to be? Do I look like a man who can’t extricate himself from an unwanted embrace?”

His cheeks were flagged with pomegranate red. “Commander...”

“Kenan.”

“K-Kenan...” His eyes flicked back and forth between mine while he tried to work out what to say. I pulled one hand off his hip to cup his cheek. My thumb ran across his evening stubble.

I debated whether or not he was ready to hear it. Ultimately, I realized the answer was no. He was definitely not ready to hear it. But his need for release and connection was too strong to ignore.

“I want you,” I said. “I want you more than I’ve wanted anything before. But it’s not about me. I think you need to get out of your head for a while. Stop fucking thinking and just let yourself feel.”

As I spoke, his eyes grew wider. “What are you saying?”

I stepped closer and brushed the front of my pants against his. The heat from his erection pressed against mine despite the multiple layers of fabric separating the two. “I’m saying I want you to suck my cock.”

My own words surprised me. I’d planned to suggest he lie back and let me pleasure him, let me tease and torture him until all he could think about in this room tens of thousands of feet above the earth was the moment I would finally relent and let him come.

But as soon as the words were out, and I saw them ignite something deep in his eyes, I knew my subconscious had somehow known exactly what he needed.

I lowered my voice and leaned in to brush my lips against his ear. “Your lips stretched wide around my cock. Saliva dripping down your chin. Your hands shaking as you fight against the urge to take yourself in hand. That’s what I want.”

His entire body trembled. “That’s ridiculous.” His words were breathy, a weak attempt at brushing me off. “You... you can’t want...”

I let out a deep laugh. “I want. Believe me, Mr. President . I definitely want .”

CHAPTER TEN

GARNER

I couldn't do this. It was an impossible situation. Being offered everything I'd ever wanted on a silver goddamned platter and knowing the minute I took it, I'd be signing my own ruin.

"I can't," I breathed, still drunk on his scent. Echoes of him referring to me as "Mr. President" sent chills racing across my skin. Why was that so hot? Because it was forbidden? Because no US president in history had been seduced by his bodyman on board Air Force One?

And why was that?

Because it was career suicide. Because I was the first out gay president. Because if anyone discovered I was sleeping with my personal aide, I would be excoriated.

"I can't," I said, this time more sure of myself. I shook off the effects of our nearness and tried to step back again. He let me go, his hands falling to his sides so quickly I nearly fell onto the bed in the center of the room. I made an embarrassing sound before catching myself and straightening back up. "It... you're..." I cleared my throat. "We both know that would be impossible."

He studied me. Something about his calm got under my skin. Nothing ruffled Kenan Harper. Nothing. It was why I'd been so affected by his emotional outburst tonight. Maybe that was the reason I'd let myself get too close.

I scratched the edge of my jaw while I waited for him to agree, to bashfully pull away with a muttered apology.

That's not what happened.

He stepped closer. Too close. The scent of him wrapped around me again, and this time, it made my skin feel raw like a too-rough scrub with salt and sand. I shuddered and clamped my teeth against the sound bubbling up in my throat.

"Tell me you don't want it," he said in a low voice. "Tell me you don't want to sink to your knees for me, Garner."

My eyes fluttered closed. Heat flooded my face. Blood surged south to my dick. I wanted it. I wanted him, so badly I could taste the salt on the back of my tongue.

I breathed a please into the air between us. If he kept coming at me like this, I wouldn't be able to say no. I wouldn't stay strong. I would bend to his will and set an entire tragedy in motion.

My legs wobbled until I locked my knees. "This... this is a mistake," I begged. "If anyone?—"

"The door is locked. No one will know. If you don't trust me to keep your secrets, Mr. President, you hired the wrong man for this job."

I opened my eyes to see him peering down at me with that same laser intensity. I was tall, but Kenan Harper was huge. He was often mistaken for Secret Service or a bodyguard of some kind. I'd often wondered how he'd managed to live on ships in the Navy without acquiring a brain injury.

He reached out and lifted my chin. "Let yourself have this, Garner. Hell... let me

have this.” The last part was said with a chuckle. The deep but rarely seen dimple popped next to the left edge of his lips, and I was gone.

My legs finally buckled, and I hit the carpet on my knees.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

KENAN

Seeing the president on his knees for me nearly made me come in my pants. I defy anyone to imagine a power fantasy hotter than having this beautiful man at their feet, cheeks stained red from embarrassment and lips moist from nervous swipes of his tongue.

It was hotter even than all the times I'd imagined it.

"You locked the door?"

I nodded and reached out to run my fingers through his hair, displacing the carefully styled blond waves until he looked properly disheveled.

His eyes were the same green depths, but now the waves were stormy with fear.

I debated how much to tell him, but I couldn't let him enter into this unless I had his full understanding and consent.

"Let yourself have this," I murmured, brushing my thumb across his cheek. "When was the last time you had sex?"

I already suspected the answer, but I asked it anyway. He needed to hear himself say it.

“Five years ago. The night before I won the primary.”

His ex had been scared off by the media frenzy. The relationship hadn't been strong enough to survive it, and thank god for that. Miles Farrow was an insufferable ass. It had taken him exactly three weeks to sign a book deal about his six-month stint as Garner Ashley's most serious public relationship.

Garner's campaign had barely survived the negative press, and I remembered wanting to put out a hit on the grasping, egotistical asshat from my duty station in Guam. His sister had emailed me about it, venting her anger at someone who'd always been known as a dependable “dead end” for gossip.

My rage had lasted for days, only ebbing once he'd won the election in a landslide victory.

And then I'd come home.

“Let yourself have this,” I repeated. This time, it was more of a command than a suggestion. “You think you're above basic human needs? You think you're required to stay celibate because gay men should be held to a higher standard? Would you deny yourself a sex life if you were straight?”

“It's about trust,” he snapped, finally showing his spine again. “How am I supposed to find someone I can get naked with when the last person I slept with sold me out?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “Do not compare me to Miles Fucking Farrow. Not now, not ever.”

He opened his mouth, maybe to apologize, but I didn't let him speak.

“Do you trust me?”

“Of course I trust you! You’re the only person I trust outside of my family! I trust you more than my chief of staff, for god’s sake. Of course I trust you.”

I squeezed the tip of his chin between my fingers, enough to keep his attention focused squarely on me. “Then give me the real reason you don’t want to do this.”

“I do want to do this! I want it so badly I ache with it. How could I not want it... you ? You’re... you’re... Just fucking look at yourself, Kenan. Christ.” His hand flapped between us. His face was so close to the front of my tight pants I could feel my dick leaking in response.

I felt my back teeth clench. “Then suck my cock, Mr. President. Do it now.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

GARNER

As soon as he'd challenged me about my level of trust in him, I'd known I was going to do it. There was no arguing with him when he truly was the person I trusted most in the world. He'd proven himself time and time again. He was also so blessedly beautiful, so bossy and calm, that I ached with the need to please him.

My hands shook as I lifted them to his belt.

His finger lifted my chin again before his hand moved down to wrap lightly around my throat. "Tell me you don't feel pressured into doing something you don't want to do."

I suddenly realized the situation was just as dangerous for him as it was for me. If anyone found out about this, he would be outed on a global stage. His military reputation, his conservative family back home, and his image of the all-American golden boy would mean nothing if he became known as the president's fuck boy.

"I want to protect you," I said, not actually answering his question.

His expression turned tender for a split second. "You let me do the protecting. Do you want this?"

I let go of his belt buckle and held my hands out flat between us. They shook like I was several days past my last meal. "More than you could possibly know. This isn't

nerves, Commander. It's excitement and desire. Disbelief that you could want this too."

The dimple appeared again, and I almost rolled my eyes. He was only six years younger than I was, but with that grin, he looked much younger.

"Then what are you waiting for?" he asked, sliding his grip off my throat and moving my hands back to his belt.

I couldn't hold back an answering smile, partly because the stress had begun to fall away, replaced by giddy joy at the prospect of getting this man naked and allowing myself to touch him. But also because it had been a long time since someone had presumed to boss me around.

Having almost everyone in my sphere defer to me politely was incredibly isolating. Having Kenan Harper disagree with me, disallow my excuses, and dismiss my fears was invigorating. It made me feel human again.

It made me feel normal.

I slid the thick leather strap through the metal loop before glancing up at him to see if he was watching. His eyes weren't on my hands or his belt.

They were on me.

His head tilted as he studied me. I was fully dressed but felt completely bared to him.

I leaned forward and pressed my face into the front of his pants, feeling the smooth metal of the buckle against my forehead as I inhaled.

Kenan made a surprised sound deep in his throat, then palmed the back of my head to

hold me in place.

“That’s it. Take all you need,” he murmured as I simply drank in the moment, the heat of his body, the scent of his groin, the feel of his thick thigh muscles under my palms.

I pulled back and opened his pants. It had been so long since I’d done this, but it felt natural.

Normal.

Except for the fact it was Kenan Harper I was doing it to. There was nothing normal about that.

The first thing I noticed when his pants opened, revealing the light-gray cotton of his boxer briefs, was a dark, wet spot over the bulge of his erection.

Commander Kenan Harper was leaking for me.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

KENAN

I was known for my rock-steady control. In the Navy, I was unruffleable. As the president's bodyman, I was incapable of being taken by surprise.

But right now? With Garner on his knees for me? I was struggling to keep from popping off in his face.

His hair was thick between my fingers, the blond waves as luxurious to touch as I'd imagined. When he looked back up at me before sliding my pants and underwear down, I could see the silent plea for permission.

I tilted my chin down.

The elastic band caught my erection and pulled it down before my cock sprang back up, brushing against his cheek. He made a gasping noise before leaning in to rub his face against it again.

The man was touch starved. Sex starved. Man starved. And I wanted to make sure he never went hungry again.

Tonight wasn't just about a one-off pressure release. Not if I had anything to say about it.

"Mmhm," I murmured. "That feel good?"

He tilted his face up, deliberately running the hard press of his chin up my shaft. “Tell me to stop.”

I couldn’t hold back a laugh. “Not happening. Never in a million years. Not for all the money in the world.”

Garner’s grin shot firecrackers straight up through my chest until my face burned with the heat. I was relieved to see him begin to relax and allow himself pleasure.

He turned back to my cock, nosing it lightly before reaching up to grasp around the root. “It’s been so long, I’ve forgotten... teeth or no teeth?”

I grabbed the front of his button-down shirt and yanked him up suddenly, crashing my mouth on his to taste his teasing lips. He jumped and gasped in surprise before relaxing into my assault. I kissed him desperately, silently chastising myself for no longer taking it slow. My intention had been to ease him into it with a quick exchange of orgasms before working on him longer for more.

I wanted everything with Garner Ashley. I’d spent four long years imagining it, daydreaming about it, and trying to figure out how to make it happen.

The key, I’d realized, had been to take it slowly. The man was scared and self-isolating. It would take a while to sneak past his defenses.

But having him here, this close to me, was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

And the whimpering noise of surrender coming from his throat while I kissed the hell out of him was making it impossible for me to slow down.

He tasted like the sweet, creamy coffee I’d been serving him all evening. I couldn’t get enough of it.

I slid my arms around him and held on tight. “I have wanted you for a very long time,” I admitted between kisses.

“Kenan, fuck ,” he said on a gasp as my lips and teeth moved down to his neck. “I can’t... I...”

I pulled back suddenly and glared at him. “Are we really going to have this conversation again?”

Instead of the worry and fear I expected to see in his expression, it morphed into self-deprecating humor. “I was going to say I can’t kiss you much longer like this without coming in my pants.”

He was so goddamned beautiful. I brought my hands up to cradle his face. “What do you want? I’ll do anything for you except stop touching you.”

His eyes heated.

And then he slid once again to his knees.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

GARNER

This time, I wasn't going to let anything stop me. Not fear, not shame, and not the irresistible temptation of Kenan Harper's kiss.

I pulled his thick cock into my grip and leaned in to taste the wet tip. The noise Kenan made went straight to my own dick, which was currently trying to strangle itself in my pants.

I fumbled for my belt with one hand while I proceeded to hold Kenan's cock with my other so I could kiss, lick, and suck it. As soon as I stretched my lips around the head, I closed my eyes in hot relief.

My tongue toyed with his frenulum as I opened my pants and reached inside to take hold of my own hard shaft.

"Fuck," Kenan groaned above me. "You're killing me. Show me that dick, sweetheart. Just like that."

I preened under his attention, stroking myself while pleasuring him. My senses were overwhelmed in the best way. I no longer worried about finishing too soon because there wasn't enough space in my brain for worry. All there was was want .

I wanted to come.

I wanted to savor the sensation of Kenan's heavy dick in my mouth.

I wanted to bring him pleasure and hear the sounds he would make as he came.

I wanted to forget everything else outside of this, us , what was happening in this space and in this moment.

His cock was hot and smooth against my tongue. When I leaned forward to take as much of it in as possible, I reveled in the sounds he made and the slight tightening of his fingers in my hair.

The sound of my gagging filled the room, and I hoped to god my private quarters were as soundproofed as I'd been told they were. I could only imagine what the Secret Service agent stationed outside would think if they weren't.

Early on, I'd worried that some people would automatically suspect there was something personal between Kenan and me, mostly because we were always together. Rather, he was always with me. He was a beautiful man, and many people assumed that would be an irresistible temptation for me.

I was embarrassed to admit they were right.

There'd been a salacious inference on a conservative late-night show about it, but then Kenan had been spotted the following week at a popular restaurant with a well-known member of the congressional staff. In addition to being well respected in her job, she was also well-known for being one of the most attractive single women on Capitol Hill.

Speculation about their relationship had blown up, not only among the talking heads but also among my own family members. Cat had called me to ask me what I knew about it, and my mother had clucked her disapproval.

“A Washington power player will chew that poor boy up and spit him out,” she’d said, forgetting for a minute that I was a Washington power player.

“He can handle himself,” I’d muttered. “Besides, he hardly has time for a personal life. If he attempted a serious relationship right now, chances are, it would crash and burn.”

Maybe that had been more hope than reality. The reality was, when he’d asked for a few minutes to speak to me about his job a week later, my bowels had loosened in gut-cramping fear he was going to quit in order to pursue a real life.

A happy life.

A life where he was loved the way he deserved.

He’d sat down across from my desk and apologized. “I hope you aren’t disappointed in me for interfering, but I couldn’t stand knowing how the speculation about... about us was distracting you.”

I’d stared at him. “What do you mean, interfering?”

He’d frowned. “By setting up that public date with Anna Cooperman and leaking it to the press. I thought... excuse me. I thought you knew about it.”

I’d been so relieved I’d barked out a laugh. “Yes, I... I mean, of course I knew. It’s all anyone’s been talking about for the past week.”

“Sorry, sir. Again, I should have come to you first, but I knew what you’d say. You’d say to ignore them. But I just...” He’d clenched his jaw and stared at me. “That wasn’t possible.”

“You’re free to date whoever you want, Commander,” I’d assured him.

He’d paused a beat and tilted his head before meeting my eye. “Am I?”

The question had hit the air strangely, as if it carried a world of meaning I was too dense to understand. I’d stared at him as the words slithered around my brain and heart... my conscience... trying to determine the right response.

Instead of waiting for an answer, he’d tilted his chin down in what might have been a nod, smiled too politely, and then stood.

“It’s time for your one o’clock meeting with the joint chiefs, sir. I’ll let them in.”

Now, here, while Air Force One cut through the summer night sky on its way back to Washington, DC, the right response to his question came screaming into my head.

I pulled off his cock and stared up at him. “No one else, Commander Harper. No one but me.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

KENAN

I knew right away what he was referring to. Even though it had happened at least two years ago, our conversation had stayed with me. I'd already felt sure my attraction wasn't one-sided, but that was the day I knew he wasn't ready to act on it.

He was clearly terrified. And I hadn't blamed him one bit. President Ashley couldn't risk a short-term relationship during his presidency. He would be harshly judged even by his supporters for not focusing all of his attention on the job.

So I'd let him pull away. I'd let him duck back behind his protective shell and pretend there was nothing between us.

But I'd turned my daydream sessions into strategy sessions.

His presidency wouldn't last forever. His need to focus on the job wouldn't last forever. And hopefully, his fear would eventually be overcome by his bravery.

Because Garner Ashley was brave as fuck. He'd withstood floods of hate to get where he was today. He continued to be the target of death threats, and there were even some global leaders who refused to sit down with him one-on-one because of his sexuality. And still, he continued to show up and work his ass off for our country, for our future, for the good of people all over the world who were impacted by our country's leadership choices.

I looked down at him with more than tender affection. “Only you,” I promised. “It’s only ever been you.”

His eyes fluttered closed as he leaned forward and rested his face against my hip. My dick was so hard it hurt like a bitch, but this encounter was turning out to be about more than the quick stress relief I’d originally anticipated. We both seemed eager to get off, but we were also anxious to make the emotional connection we’d been fighting against for so long.

“Tell me what to do,” he whispered. “I always know how to handle any situation that comes my way, but not this. I feel like... I feel like I’m standing on the edge of cracking ice, Kenan.”

I leaned down and grabbed him under the arms, hauling him up to his feet before moving him to the bed. I began unbuttoning his shirt as quickly as possible. I wanted skin-to-skin contact, and I wanted the two of us in bed.

“I want you,” I began, focusing on not tearing the buttons as I worked them through the tiny holes. “I’ve wanted you for an embarrassingly long time. And before you interrupt me to tell me why it can’t work, I want you to listen to me.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the edge of his lips turn up in an affectionate smile. I exhaled. “I don’t need you to be all in right now. And I don’t need you to make me any promises. But I need you to know I... I care about you deeply. You’re truly the first person I think about when I wake up and the last image in my mind before I fall asleep, and no, it’s not because of my job.” I chanced a glance at his face. His eyes carried warmth and happiness. “Garner, you deserve to be with someone who cares about you. You deserve to have pleasure and joy and comfort just like everyone else. Watching you deny yourself for these past five years has broken my fucking heart.”

His hands moved carefully to my own shirt buttons and began to work them open.
“And what about you? Don’t you deserve the same?”

I met his eyes. “Yes. That’s why I’m asking you to take a chance on me. This isn’t just a one-night thing. If you need it to be... well, then... I guess I can pretend. I’ll tell you what you want to hear, and then I’ll continue loving you anyway.”

His eyes widened in surprise.

Which was how I realized what I’d said.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

GARNER

A hot flush washed through my body as soon as he said the word “love” in reference to me. I guess a part of me had already known it, had felt it for several years.

Kenan Harper loved me. He cared for me like I was precious. I’d excused or explained it away as simply part of doing his job, but deep down I’d known the truth.

No other bodyman would care for their president the way he’d always cared for me. He noticed when I hadn’t eaten. He noticed when I was exhausted to the point of making mental mistakes. And he noticed when I was overwhelmed or depressed. During the midterm elections, when there’d been several key congressional seats that would take all night to be decided, I’d found a colorful children’s book on my dresser in the residence. It was called Patrick Picklebottom and the Longest Wait and was about how hard it was to be patient.

I’d snorted and caught myself grinning in the antique mirror above the historic dresser. The only person who could have possibly put it there, and the person who most intimately knew how much the wait was killing me, was Kenan.

“You love me.” I’d meant it as a question, but as soon as the words leapt off my tongue, I’d known them to be true.

His cheeks flushed a surprising deep red. “I don’t want to pressure you.”

I pulled his shirt open and shoved it off his shoulders. “You’re one of the only people in my life who’s never made me feel pressured.”

He blew out a breath. “Good.”

My hands moved to his pants. They were already open, so I pushed everything off before moving my hands around to feel his ass cheeks. He was muscular and fit, with an ass I’d caught myself staring at many, many times. Even one of the women on my staff had mentioned what a great ass Commander Harper had. Not to me, of course, but to some of the other staffers who’d been gossiping outside the Roosevelt Room one afternoon.

And now, Kenan was mine.

“I...” I wanted to admit my serious feelings too, to let him know so he wouldn’t wonder about it. But it was nearly impossible for me to say the words.

He grinned and pulled my shirt down until it pinned my arms to my sides. “You what?”

I squeezed his ass, happily content for my hands to be frozen in that particular place. “I have feelings for you too.”

“Feelings?” he teased. “What kind of feelings, President Ashley?”

My cheeks heated at the title. He was doing it on purpose to toy with me. “Strong feelings,” I admitted. “L-...lovely feelings.”

He finished pulling off my shirt before reaching to cup my face again. His leaking cock, still wet with my saliva, brushed the front of my pants before he pressed even closer.

“I’ll take lovely,” Kenan said on a soft laugh before leaning in to kiss me. It was tender and soft, nothing like the sexually charged moments from earlier. I felt worshipped and adored. Not rushed. Not pushed.

I tried to tell him what I really meant, what I really felt , with my kisses and touches.

“I want you inside me,” I finally confessed against his warm lips. “Please, Commander.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

KENAN

That was all I needed to hear. I felt his love for me in every touch. Hell, in the very fact of his willingness to risk everything by being alone with me, half-naked aboard Air Force One.

I pulled back and instructed him to finish undressing and get on the bed. Garner watched me as I moved to the small bathroom and rooted around in his toiletry kit.

Since I was the one who packed him for these trips, I knew there was a small bottle of personal lubricant included in his Dopp kit. If he ever wanted to pleasure himself, I wanted to make sure there was always something available to him. Watching the level drop in the bottle with each trip had been an excruciating turn-on.

Refilling it had always made me hard.

I'd never dreamed I'd be using it with him on one of these trips. That I'd be using it on him.

When I returned to the bedroom, Garner was stretched out on his back, fully naked. His hand stroked his cock as he watched me approach. Gone was the deer-in-headlights look, the stark fear radiating off his entire body. He seemed eager and happy, at least until his fears began encroaching again.

I still didn't know whether this was a one-off, something he'd only allow in a

moment of weakness, or not, but it didn't matter. I would take what he was willing to give. And gladly.

I began by kissing his ankle and dropping more open-mouthed kisses up his shin and on the inside of his knee. My hands roamed across muscular thighs covered in the crisp texture of his body hair.

President Garner Ashley was a runner. It was something he'd always done as a quick way to get cardio no matter where in the world he was, but he'd also turned it into a great stress reliever, jumping on the treadmill in the residential gym when what he really wanted to do was scream or cry.

I'd run alongside him hundreds of times now, and yet I'd tried my hardest to keep from staring at his muscular legs while they worked. Now, I could take my fill.

And I did.

"You're so fucking sexy," I murmured, running the tip of my tongue up his inner thigh to his sac and nosing it out of the way. When I tasted the skin in the crease between his leg and his cock, he sucked in a breath.

I moved my hands to his legs to push them up until his hole was visible in front of me.

And then I blew hot breath across it to tease another gasping curse out of him. He was so fun to tease, his noises and the clenching of his muscles a satisfying reward for touching and tasting him.

I reached out my tongue to swipe it across his hole and continued to kiss, lick, and suck it until he had to slam a hand over his mouth to keep from begging. All that was left were desperate whimpers when I finally slicked up my fingers and began to

stretch him open.

“I haven’t slept with anyone in four and a half years, Garner,” I said, making sure he heard me clearly. “And I know you’re negative. Can I go bare with you?”

Deep green pools met my gaze as he nodded.

When I moved over the top of him and finally, fucking finally , began pushing my cock inside of him, I closed my eyes on a groan.

President Garner Ashley’s hole squeezed around me.

And I knew I was finally home.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

GARNER

I felt like a virgin again, all nerves and excitement. My hole stretched uncomfortably wide to accommodate Kenan's girth, and I secretly hoped to still feel the burn tomorrow and for a long time after.

I clutched at him as he slowly pressed inside me. How had I gone this long without touching him like this? How had I survived this long without experiencing his hands on me, his mouth on me, his dogged determination to give me physical and emotional pleasure?

When I'd adjusted fully to him, he leaned over me and pressed light kisses to my lips and face. "You okay?"

I held his head and tried not to let my emotional overwhelm leak out of my eyes. "So okay." I swallowed. "I love you."

So much for holding back the emotion. When I saw the vulnerability in his eyes, followed by radiant joy, I knew I was lost. This was the beginning of everything, and I would find a way to make it work one way or another.

"I love you too," he breathed, squeezing his eyes closed for a beat. "And I'll do anything you want except walk away from this."

As we kept our eyes locked together, Kenan began thrusting in and out of me, slowly

at first, until I begged him to move faster. He changed the angle before speeding up, and I felt my eyes roll back. My entire body thrummed with need, and my balls drew up. I reached down to stroke myself at the same time he reached for my cock.

“Baby...” he urged. “Tell me what you need.”

Apparently, all I’d needed was an endearment spoken in his voice and loaded with affection. I came on a muffled cry, biting down softly on the meat of his biceps to keep from screaming.

I felt his muscle bunch against my lips as he gasped and grunted, shoving his body as deep into me as he could to ride out his orgasm.

His hot, damp skin was a magnet for my hands. I touched him everywhere, trying to map the contours of his body so I could replay this moment over and over again long after he was dressed and gone.

Because there was no way Kenan Harper, bodyman to the president of the United States, could spend the entire night in the president’s bed on board Air Force One.

It was one thing for him to be in here late at night, even for a few hours. For all anyone knew, he was consulting with me on my clothing, facilitating personal jobs like discussing needed appointments and errands, or simply organizing my personal effects.

But if he stayed in here long past the time I was supposed to be asleep... there would be no way to keep this interlude secret.

People would talk, and the rumors and speculation would move through the staff like wildfire. His private life would cease to exist the way mine had, and he’d be targeted even more by the press than he already was.

“Shhh,” he whispered into my hair. “Stand down, Mr. President. I promise to protect you. Please lie here and enjoy this moment with me. We can talk about the rest after my heart rate returns to normal.”

I ran my hands greedily back up his back and into his hair before turning to meet his lips. He was right.

Our reckoning would come soon enough.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

KENAN

Garner fell asleep in my arms. After getting up and washing us both off, I'd settled back in the bed with him for a cuddle. His head rested naturally on my shoulder as I tickled my fingertips softly up and down his back and across his shoulders. It took less than three minutes before his body relaxed more heavily against mine and his breathing evened out.

I needed to leave.

His fear had been palpable earlier, and I knew he would wake up and revert immediately to the man who'd decided early on to lock away all signs of a romance between himself and another man during his presidency.

And I would go along with it.

I would be the one person in his life who didn't make demands of him. Who didn't rush him. Who didn't expect more than he could give.

Garner knew how I felt about him, and as long as he carried that with him, deep and solid in the center of his chest, I would be happy.

And I would wait.

I let myself have ten minutes only, and then I slipped out of bed and pulled my

clothes back on before checking myself in the mirror to make sure there was no sign of what we'd done.

Then, I laid out a clean T-shirt for him on the bedside table in case he had to wake suddenly and realized he was only wearing pajama bottoms. I leaned over for a final kiss to his temple before turning off the light and walking out.

The agent on duty nodded at me as I walked past and made my way back to the staff room to take a seat and try to get some sleep while the president slept. Thankfully, no one, including the agent on duty, had looked at me funny. Everything seemed normal as I settled into my seat and fastened my seat belt.

President Ashley's personal assistant leaned over from the seat next to me. "How's he doing?"

Rosa Muran had been Garner's assistant for almost fifteen years, ever since he was elected to the Indiana House of Representatives. She doted on him almost as much as I did, but her doting was public, while mine was very much not.

"He's understandably upset by the losses," I murmured. "He'll have to call the families in a few hours."

She nodded. "I have everything ready. When he gets up and starts his day, I'll facilitate the calls with him."

I reclined the seat and closed my eyes. Images of our time together kept me company as I forced myself to relax. Rosa's comment reminded me how hectic Garner's schedule would be as soon as we returned to the White House. Understandably, I would go back to being his silent shadow, only this time, I imagined there'd be an invisible live wire connecting us.

He would be too scared to go public with our relationship. I knew that for sure. But I wondered if he'd consider at least discussing options.

What would I do if he asked me to quit my job before we went public? He'd have to hire a new bodyman to take over my position, and where would that leave me? Finding time with the president was nearly impossible, even with his own closest advisors.

I couldn't imagine how difficult it would be for a new boyfriend.

No. If given the option, I'd much rather continue to be his bodyman, take care of him night and day, and bide my time for three and a half more years until we could be together.

Perhaps snatched moments like the one we'd just experienced would tide me over...

CHAPTER TWENTY

GARNER

I slept deeply for several hours. When I woke up, I was surprised to feel utter calm acceptance of the change in my relationship with Kenan.

That wasn't all I felt, of course. I also felt excitement, contentment, stark joy, and warm, eager hope.

I also felt confident that Kenan Harper was the man for me, which made the challenges inherent in our situation much easier to solve.

I wanted to be with him. Fully and permanently. The question was, how could I go about it without blowing up either of our lives or putting him in danger?

If he knew I was concerned about his safety, he'd call me out for it. He'd snap that I was the one who needed protecting, and protecting him wasn't my job.

But he was wrong.

Commander Kenan Harper might be a tough, seasoned military man who'd never been the type to back down from a challenge. He might be physically intimidating and used to walking through the world unafraid. And he might—okay, he definitely would—be able to handle anything the media threw at him.

But Kenan was precious. He was loved. He was mine .

So protecting him wasn't just my job; it was my privilege.

I showered and dressed before leaving my private quarters to meet with my press secretary and the rest of the senior staff. The agent outside of my room indicated everyone was gathered in the dining room preparing for breakfast even though it would be nearly midnight in DC when we landed in a couple of hours.

As I made my way downstairs, my body reminded me of my time in bed with Kenan. I wondered if I'd be able to be in the same room as him without making my feelings obvious. My sister had accused me of having a poker face in the past, but my feelings were so strong for Kenan Harper, no poker face on Earth would be able to hide them.

When I entered the dining room, I didn't see him. My shoulders drooped in disappointment a split second before the hairs on my neck stood up.

"Mr. President," his familiar deep murmur brushed against my ear as he moved beside me from where he'd been standing outside my line of sight.

"Commander." I turned to meet his eye and angled my shoulders so no one else in the room could see my face.

Then I smiled at him, with as much knowing and loving as I possibly could.

His own eyes widened slightly before he schooled his expression. "Sleep well?"

"Very well. Thank you ."

I turned back to greet everyone else. I felt Kenan move behind me and take a seat on the end next to the press secretary's personal assistant. Kenan tried very hard not to take up space in a gathering of senior staff, but I'd insisted early on that he be allowed to eat with me unless there was a formal reason for him not to.

As soon as I sat down, the press secretary began explaining the press coverage of the aborted coup in Cedruaze and the key points included in our official statement. I ate while noting various talking points I needed to remember for when I met with the press after breakfast. My mind was quickly directed to work, but I took a moment after finishing my meal to ask the press secretary for a private meeting the following day.

“Tell Rosa to find you a half hour on my schedule, please. I’d like your help on a private matter.”

I could tell she was taken by surprise. “Of course, sir. I’ll get it arranged and be available when you are.”

I didn’t look at Kenan, but I felt his eyes on me as I stood up and left the dining room to move to my office with Rosa to make the family condolence calls.

He might not know it yet, but he’d given me something to fight for last night.

And I was not backing down.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KENAN

President Ashley was all business for the remainder of the flight, which was as it should be. Even though he hadn't needed to, he'd offered me a heartfelt smile of reassurance as soon as he'd seen me in the dining room.

The rest could wait.

When he'd asked the press secretary to find time the following day to discuss something private, I wondered if it had anything to do with me. Maybe it was simply giving the woman a heads-up of the potential scandal if anyone saw or heard anything they shouldn't have, or maybe he had more involved plans I wasn't aware of.

It took all of my patience to keep my mouth closed and not distract him with any questions about it. His attention was in high demand from his staff, the press, and the same military blowhards from the Cedruaze affair. Our relationship, whatever it would be going forward, would have to be a much lower priority.

When we finally landed at Joint Base Andrews and moved to Marine One, I was grateful it was so late. I hadn't gotten quality sleep on the plane, and I looked forward to a real bed.

I forced myself not to make any assumptions. For all I knew, Garner needed time to come to terms with this change between us and determine what exactly he wanted from it.

And when.

So when we finally escaped the demands on his attention and left the Oval Office to head to the residence, I took in a deep breath and silently lectured myself on the value of patience.

I tried to channel Patrick Picklebottom and the Longest Wait .

Warm summer air floated across the Rose Garden, bringing its familiar floral scent to the colonnade as we made our way from the West Wing to the residence. Bougainvillea blossoms bobbed their heads as we walked by.

Lights and sounds of the city encroached, but for some reason, they always seemed fairly removed across the acres of pristinely manicured gardens separating us from the city streets.

Several agents stood sentinel along the path as we passed by. Even if they hadn't been there, I wouldn't have spoken to the president about private matters unless invited to or securely locked behind closed doors.

So when we made it to the residence and were finally free of all the agents, I decided to continue upstairs to my own bedroom.

Garner made a growling noise in his throat. I blinked at him in surprise. "Sir?"

"Can we talk?"

I must have let my sudden anxiety show in my expression because he quickly sputtered, "Not like that. Like... just talk. Not... Please ?"

I nodded and followed him to his bedroom, where he closed the door and locked it

before pulling me over to the padded bench at the foot of the bed before kicking off his shoes and then climbing onto my lap to straddle me.

He wasn't a small man, but then again, neither was I.

My hands went immediately to his ass. Touching him after several hours of keeping my distance was too good to be true.

He leaned in to kiss me, and I hardly even noticed when all my rational thoughts hopped a midnight train going anywhere but here.

We kissed desperately, hungry to reconnect and ensure ourselves and each other it hadn't all been a dream or a onetime thing.

"Missed you," he managed to say between kisses.

"Love you," I said back.

He tucked his nose into my neck and took a few deep breaths before pulling back and firming his jaw. "And I have a plan."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

GARNER

My plan was more of a plea.

“I want to go public,” I began, anticipating a negative reaction.

Kenan didn’t even blink. “Okay. When?”

“Soon. Whenever the press secretary thinks is best, but soon. I don’t...” I moved my hands to the buttons of his shirt and began unbuttoning them slowly. “I don’t want to spend another night apart if we can help it, so...”

“So eventually, we’ll get found out anyway,” Kenan suggested with the merest hint of a grin. He moved his hands up to catch mine and stop me from undressing him. “Talk to me about what you’re thinking. How do you want this to play out?”

“I want you to be protected,” I admitted. “A Secret Service detail or whatever version of it they think is best, considering you’ll still be with me most of the time.” This was the part I was worried about. “That is... if you’re still willing to stay as my?—”

“Yes,” he said in a rush, pressing a hard kiss against my mouth before I could take in a breath. “Fuck yes. I was worried you’d want me to?—”

I replaced my lips with my hand to stop him. “No. I’m too selfish. I can’t imagine not having you with me every day.”

My hand lowered to press over his heart. “It’s going to be hard, Kenan. People are going to try and tear us apart.”

He nodded. “I know, baby. But it’s going to be hard no matter when we do it, and I don’t want to wait three and a half more years for people to know how much you mean to me. Besides, nothing anyone could say would make me turn away from you.”

Hearing him call me baby , I felt like I could breathe fully for the first time all day. “Same. Okay, so... you’re going to sleep in here with me now, right?”

A sexy-as-hell glint entered his eyes. “Fuck yes, I am. And you can go back to unbuttoning my shirt now.”

That night, the sex was carefree and easy. It was still steeped in meaning and hot as hell, but it was also filled with joyful celebration since we could finally be together without worrying about who noticed how long he was in my room or who heard any noises we made.

We were able to stay awake for several rounds of shared orgasms, and when I finally fell asleep, it was curled up against an already snoring bodyman.

The next morning, we woke up criminally early because of the jet lag. The extra time allowed us to linger together in my shower before finally separating to dress. For the time being, his personal belongings, including his clothes, were upstairs in a residential staff bedroom. Since he was the only staff member who lived here, we didn’t have to worry about anyone else seeing him return to his room in the early hours of the morning.

By the time we met back up in the residence’s breakfast room and rang for coffee, it appeared to be business as usual to my staff.

We ate quietly while I reviewed today's agenda on my tablet. When we were ready, we made our way back to the West Wing and into the Oval Office.

Kenan busied himself with the usual early morning tasks. Preparing the ice-filled water bottle I preferred to keep with me. Setting out my daily vitamins and supplements and standing over me until I swallowed the horse pills down against my will. Stacked needed folders and documents on my desk within easy reach and let Rosa know when I was ready to start my official day.

While Rosa walked in my first visitor, I turned to Kenan and pointed at my tablet, where it clearly showed the press secretary meeting I'd requested had been wedged onto my schedule at 10:15 a.m.

I lifted an eyebrow at him, and he nodded.

Only three more hours before we would spill our secret to someone outside of the two of us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

KENAN

The following three weeks passed in a blur of meetings, media training, and even several unexpected, supposedly “well-meaning” warning conversations with people I’d thought were friends.

“Don’t do this,” a well-respected member of the president’s senior staff had hissed at me after learning about my relationship with the president. “Are you fucking insane? This will ruin him.”

I’d bitten my teeth together and felt my nose flare. “Would you say that if I was a woman?”

“Of course I would,” he’d snapped back. “Sleeping with his bodyman? It’s tawdry and sensational, not to mention the Me Too people are going to have a field day.”

“President Ashley and I have known each other for a very long time,” I’d reminded him. “Long before he was ever the president.”

“If you truly cared about him, you’d stay the hell away from him.”

I’d seen Garner’s face peering at us from down the hall. He must have known from my body language what was happening, but thankfully, he stayed away.

“It’s because I care about him that I’ll endure anything to make sure he is loved

openly by the person he wants most,” I’d said as calmly as I could.

I hadn’t come to this conclusion easily. Honestly, I’d spent a few hours in consultation with one of the Navy psychologists I’d befriended several years earlier. With her help, I’d come to terms—or started to anyway—with some of my remaining fears. I’d told her about my fear of causing a stain on his legacy, and she’d reminded me that standing proudly next to him as the first out gay president lived his truth in the public eye could be seen as contributing to his legacy.

“And think of the LGBTQ+ people around the world who are looking to him as their example,” she’d continued. “Should they see him keep his love in the dark? Should they learn later, in the safety of his retirement, he or his partner had been too afraid to?—”

I’d stopped her right there with a grunt of acknowledgment.

It wasn’t going to be easy or pretty.

But it would be worth it.

And it would be true.

As I entered the Oval Office at six o’clock in the evening on that Friday night in early August, I was shaking with nerves. Garner’s team had strategized it to death, and now, here we were. Tonight, we would go public with our relationship via a televised interview, and Garner’s sister had come to give us support.

Catherine looked up at me from where she sat on the sofa, scrolling on her phone. “There you are. He was getting worried.” She nodded toward the closed door to Garner’s private washroom. “Not that he wasn’t worried enough already.”

I strode over to the door and knocked once before turning the knob. “Baby?” I asked softly. “Can I come in?”

As soon as he made a sound of approval, I slipped through the door and closed it behind me. He was sitting on the back of the closed toilet seat, dressed sharply in a killer suit.

After three weeks of spending every possible night together naked and touching, I felt even closer to Garner. I could tell right away he was trying to get into the right headspace for our sit-down interview.

I could also tell he was having zero doubts about our chosen path.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

GARNER

I'd hidden in the executive washroom not because I needed to use the facilities but because I knew Kenan would come for me, and I'd wanted a moment alone with him before our interview.

I stood up and stepped into his large body, sliding my hands inside his suit jacket and around to his back. His aftershave was fresh and familiar.

My voice was muffled by his shirt front. "Theodore Roosevelt once said some bullshit about nothing worth having or doing comes without pain and difficulty. I would really like for that to not be true."

His rumble of laughter moved through his chest and into mine. "I once asked you to spare me the Trumanesque bullshit, but I'm going to Truman you right now. Do your best. History will do the rest."

I let out a melodramatic sigh. "One day, I'm going to one-up you with the Trumanesque bullshit, Commander."

He leaned in and kissed me before pulling away and cupping my face. "Beloved. I am so incredibly proud of you. And I'm even prouder to be the person you've chosen to share this life with. Today, our life of freedom begins."

I smiled at him and followed him out of the bathroom. Cat teased us and accused us

of sneaking in a stress-relieving quickie.

“I wish,” Kenan muttered. Cat was still laughing when Rosa and the press secretary came in to retrieve us. The interview was set up on a wooden bench in the Rose Garden. The sun was fat and golden in the western sky, laying warm stripes across the cooling green grass. I greeted the well-respected news personality who’d been selected for the sit-down interview.

“Thank you for coming, Sam,” I said, holding out my hand for a shake. “I don’t believe you’ve met Commander Kenan Harper. Kenan, Sam Tetlow.”

Kenan nodded, and it occurred to me that he was so used to being unseen and unheard, always half a step behind me, that it might take him a while to be comfortable taking up space at my side.

More than likely, he still wouldn’t. At least, not unless we were in private and he was technically off the clock.

Sam’s greeting was warm and inclusive. “Nice to finally meet you, Commander Harper. I’ve seen you around the Hill, but we’ve never been formally introduced.”

As Kenan and I were seated together on the bench and miked up, Sam took the nearby chair that had been brought in for the purpose. He went over a few notes about what he would and wouldn’t ask us about and then inquired whether we had anything we wanted to discuss before the interview began.

I shook my head. “All good here.” I knew better than to ask Kenan. He’d already made it clear he would follow my lead, and the press team had strongly advised him to appear polite and as unintimidating as possible. Thankfully, he hadn’t interpreted their instructions so strictly as to not sit up straight. You could take the man out of the military, but you couldn’t take the military out of the man, apparently.

As I glanced at him, I noticed he was regulating his breathing. It was a technique he'd taught me a while ago, so I took a moment to do the same.

When Sam officially began the interview, I sat up straighter and reached over to take Kenan's hand. I'd like to say I took his hand without thinking, but that would be wrong.

I'd never in my life been able to take a man's hand in public without thinking.

But this time, finally, I could take it after only a split second of wondering whether or not it was the right thing to do.

It absolutely was.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

KENAN

I was so fucking proud of Garner Ashley. If anyone had ever wondered whether this man was presidential enough to hold the office, this interview right here would have answered it once and for all.

He managed to carry himself with a calm that was somehow both regal and humble. He radiated confidence and power while he explained that he'd finally found the love of his life in an old family friend he'd known for years.

"This country was founded on freedom," he continued. "Freedom from persecution. Freedom to live our lives the way we want to without infringing on others' rights to do the same. And today, I'm living that freedom with my friends and family and with my partner, Commander Kenan Harper."

He took a breath and turned to meet my eyes. Verdant green reached inside me and took root around my heart. "Henry Truman once said, 'The truth is all I want for history.'" His eyes sparkled as my belly swooped. Damn that man to hell.

He turned back to Sam and the cameras. "I agree wholeheartedly with Truman's famous words, but I don't simply want my truth. Kenan and I would like everyone around the world to be able to live authentic lives for the sake of their love, their future, their ease and comfort, and yes... for the sake of history."

As Sam began to lob his softball questions at us, I marveled at how easy this part

was. Claiming my love for President Garner Ashley was as easy as explaining what type of flower the nearby roses were. It was a truth simply stated and unimpeachable.

So when Sam Tetlow turned to me and asked what I would tell people who criticized my personal relationship with the president, I smiled and answered truthfully. “Truthfully, I hope I would simply ignore it. What would I wish I could tell them?” I grinned. “That often the deepest hate comes from the deepest desire.” I shot a teasing glance at the man beside me. “Garner’s not the only one who can break out a famous quote to make a point. Mine was Socrates. Who happens to pre-date Truman by a good two thousand years.”

Garner laughed and squeezed my hand. I turned back to face Sam and the cameras. “The truth is, we will be criticized. But if we—and by that, I mean anyone—let criticism keep us from living our lives, then that leaves us with half a life. I can’t think of anything more miserable than making choices based on what a stranger thinks is best for me rather than what I know is best for me. And Garner Ashley? He’s the best for me. Hands down, without a doubt.”

I felt the warmth of Garner’s gaze on the side of my face. Later, I would watch the interview and see how clear his love for me was in his expression. But I didn’t need to see it to feel it. The connection between us was real. Strong. Undeniable.

Sam wrapped up the interview and stuck around to congratulate us on an exciting new venture. “It will seem like this is the most scandalous thing to hit the country in the entire history of the world,” he cautioned. “But if there’s one thing I know for sure after doing this for several decades, it’s that what seems scandalous today will seem ordinary tomorrow. Believe me when I tell you it’s just a matter of time.”

He offered his unwavering support for the future in any way he could give it, which was nice to hear.

Because the following days and weeks and months were hard as hell. But Sam Tetlow was right.

Another scandal came along less than a year later and blew ours out of the water.

Six months after that, another one landed.

And six months after that, President Garner Ashley proposed to his bodyman and announced a historic summer wedding at the White House.

Which started the scandal cycle all over again...

EPILOGUE

GARNER

I was impressed with what a good job the wedding planners had done. The Kennedy Garden had looked magical during the ceremony at sunset, and the Rose Garden had been covered in tents strung with thousands of white lights. Fat, colorful flowers decorated the dinner tables, and scattered candles added to the intimate feeling of the sit-down dinner reception.

We'd capped the invitations at two hundred, which meant the event was one of the most coveted invitations in presidential history.

Anyone who'd wanted to come for gossip reasons or to curry political favor had been crossed off the list immediately by my sister and Kenan. The two of them had been ruthless to the point that my chief of staff had begged me to intervene and release a few invitations for critical VIPs.

In the end, the guest list was almost perfect. Kenan and I had both felt relaxed and happy. We'd been able to laugh and dance and kiss without worrying about anything other than enjoying the moment.

Kenan's father had been one of our biggest obstacles, but even he had reluctantly accepted our relationship after he'd heard me make an offhand comment about how I'd always wanted to work at a hardware store.

He hadn't heard the part where I'd pretty much admitted that any job had to be more

relaxing than my current one.

Kenan sidled up to me after saying good night to my parents and sending them off to the residence with an aide. “We need to leave before my dad corners you about why you aren’t supporting Kim Nagy in the midterms,” he murmured in my ear.

I laughed and turned to kiss his cheek. “Kim Nagy is still doing consulting work for a foreign gov?—”

“Dearest husband,” he said with a finger to my lips. “I already know why you’re not supporting that campaign. What I am trying not to say too loudly is this. I would like to fuck my husband now, and since it’s my wedding night, I have a legal right to demand certain behaviors from my spouse.”

I let out a laugh, yanking his arm down and threading my fingers in his. “A legal right, huh?”

“Mmhm.”

“That sounds serious.”

“It is. It really is.”

“Maybe I should talk to your husband about this. Demand he straighten up and fly right. Do his duties, as it were.”

“You should.”

I made a point of turning to look through the dwindling crowd. “Is he around? Which one is he?”

He pulled me close and wrapped his arms around me. “He’s the sexiest man here.

You can't miss him."

I leaned in and kissed him. Familiar voices hooted and teased, but I didn't pay them any attention.

Kenan pulled away. "Come to bed, President Husband," he murmured. "I have big plans for you tonight."

And so he did.

That night, the first First Gentleman of the United States got on his knees for his husband.

And did whatever the man asked of him.