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COMMANDER IN CHIEF

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CHAPTER ONE

Candace Reid listened attentively as each person facing her took a turn apprising her of concerns and potential issues across the globe. The occasional glance at a document presented the only evidence of a diversion in her attention. She accepted a folder from NSA Director Joshua Tate. Her eyes held his momentarily before her hands lifted the cover. The room fell silent as she studied the contents without comment. Page by page, she flipped through the information, committing it to memory and filing away questions that she would need to address beyond this meeting and its participants. She closed the cover and peered over the top of her glasses at Director Tate. "How credible is this information?"

"The sources are credible enough that you're holding it," he replied.

Candace nodded her understanding, removed her glasses, and allowed her gaze to meet each person as she spoke. "I understand that this is as far as it goes for the next couple of months. Be aware that when you bring this to me after January, I will expect more than credible enough." She

held up her hand to stall any objections. "I don't need to hear your objection to see them. Understand, I will expect to know where the information you place in my hands came from—if not the who, the where. You cannot expect me to make sound judgments without something tangible, and that includes the origin of information."

Tate nodded. "I think we're all clear on that point."

"Good." Candace smiled. "In that case, I look forward to our next meeting." The group stood nearly in unison. Candace shook hands and thanked the group. "Joshua." She held Tate's hand. "Stay for a moment?"

"Ma'am."

Candace directed the NSA director to have a seat when the room had cleared.

"What can I do for you?" Tate inquired.

"I have a few important decisions facing me."

"So, I understand."

Candace chuckled. "Not the best-kept secret."

He smiled. "Not exactly."

Candace was genuinely amused. Cable news had been droning on and on, debating which people should fill Candace's cabinet. She'd found some of the debate entertaining. Lately, she welcomed a few minutes of diversion. Twenty-four-hour days seemed commonplace. Her head might be hitting the pillow at midnight; sleep seemed determined to elude her. Five million details to address and five million more decisions seemed to demand her attention. Filling her cabinet was her paramount concern. That is what had led her to ask the NSA Director to stay behind. While she enjoyed the banter of pundits, and the suppositions of "experts," Candace put stock in those she trusted. One of the names continually raised by people in Candace's inner-circle was Joshua Tate.

"Well," Candace began. "I'm always fascinated by the things people know I am about to say or do."

"I can only imagine."

"You might have heard that I have some positions to fill."

"I seem to vaguely recall that."

Candace chuckled. Good answer. Candace valued the ability of those closest to her to speak openly, to challenge her assumptions, while understanding that her decisions, once she made them were final. "You have a fan base," she told him.

"I hardly think that."

"Mmm. You enjoy the respect of people whom I trust implicitly."

Tate nodded.

"I need someone, Joshua, who can sit across from me and be willing to deliver the news I don't want to hear candidly. I need someone who will answer my questions honestly and directly—someone who isn't afraid to challenge me. Also, the people who work with me must understand that final decisions rest with me. Regardless of where the chips may fall, it will be my responsibility to account for those decisions. I will not pass that responsibility to my staff. Their responsibility will be to provide me with the facts as they understand those facts, and to give me an honest, forthright assessment of what those facts mean." Candace took a breath. "I need someone, Joshua, that I can trust to be candid with me in private. Someone who understands the need to stand shoulder to shoulder with me publicly. We both know what you shared today barely scratches the surface of what this country faces in an ever-changing world." She offered the stoic man a smile. "I'd like you to come on as my National Security Adviser."

Tate stared blankly at the President-elect. He'd briefed the woman several times, and encountered her during her time on Capitol Hill. Tate had been drilled for several hours by Candace's transition team including the incoming Vice President, and had spent nearly four hours with the former Governor of New York answering a line of questions that had astounded him with their insight. He had never expected an offer to come his way.

"You look surprised," Candace observed.

"I am."

"You shouldn't be." Candace left her seat and walked to a cabinet in the corner of the office. "Scotch?"

Tate nodded.

"Neat or on the rocks?"

"However you take it."

Candace's eyes sparkled with amusement. "Neat it is." She handed him a glass and resumed her seat. "You have advocates, Joshua."

"You're referring to Jane," he surmised.

"Not just Jane."

"Alex?"

Candace smiled. "Trust, as I am sure you are aware, is a precious commodity in this line of business. It becomes a rarity at this level."

Tate listened without comment, sipping his scotch as he regarded Candace from over the top of his glass.

"The world is a complicated place," she said. "People are not as complicated."

He smiled.

"People do, however, make the world complicated."

"They do," he agreed.

"I need someone I can count on," Candace said.

Tate nodded. "Other than the endorsements of the former First Lady and Agent Toles, why me?"

"That's not enough?" Candace teased. "Joshua, you have the experience I need. You understand something that too many people do not."

"What's that?"

"That everything that happens in our world in some way will shape everything else that happens." She sipped from her glass and set it aside. "Too often, I've seen leaders commit the cardinal sins of leadership."

"What might those be?"

"For starters, they overestimate themselves and underestimate the concerns and perspectives of those surrounding them. You know as well as I do that how we train our military will impact outcomes. How much we invest in soft power will play a significant role in how we deploy those men and women serving in our military around the globe. Our economy in many ways dictates our bearing in the world. Someone is always seeking to undermine our efforts and agenda. The idea that a foreign policy adviser needs no understanding, experience, and command of domestic problems is outdated at best. You have that experience. You've worked for FINCEN, you've worked in the upper echelons of the FBI, and you've sat in the director's chair at NSA. Who would be more qualified?"

"I don't have the military background," he offered.

"No. I have military advisers." She smiled. "The Joint Chiefs as an example. I will have a Defense Secretary. And, let's be honest, you will have dozens of people bending your ear with that experience."

"I don't know what to say."

"Yes, you do." Candace smiled.

"I'd be honored."

"Good answer," she replied. "Just remember what an absolute bitch I can be."

Tate laughed. Direct, candid, strong-willed, deliberate—all words he would use to describe the incoming president. Bitch would be nowhere on the list.

"May I ask..."

"We'll make a formal announcement this week," she told him. "Thank you for taking one major issue off my plate."

"I hope I can ease more than one."

Candace raised her glass as a toast. "So, do I."

"How's Mom?"

Jameson looked up from the paper in front of her. "Busy."

Marianne took the newspaper from Jameson's hands and laid it on the table. "Feeling lonely?"

Jameson laughed. Lonely? She was hardly lonely. Between the presence of Secret Service agents, the comings and goings of advisers, and the constant calls and visits from family, Jameson wasn't sure she could remember the last time she'd been alone. "I don't think I've been alone longer than it takes me in the shower in the last two weeks."

Marianne nodded. "I don't think being alone and being lonely are the same thing."

"They're not," a voice offered.

Marianne smiled at her mother.

Candace made her way to Jameson and placed a kiss on her cheek.

"Meeting's over?" Jameson guessed.

"It is."

"How did it go?"

"He accepted."

"That's good."

Candace sighed. "Marianne, would you give us a minute?"

Marianne winked at Jameson and left the kitchen.

"I know that look," Jameson said.

"Is that right?"

"Don't you start worrying about me."

Candace took the opportunity to plop down into Jameson's lap. "Who says I'm worried?"

"I'm all right," Jameson promised.

"I know you are."

"You do?"

"Yes, I do. But, I was hoping I might entice you to spend the rest of the evening with me. Unless you'd rather be alone."

Jameson's eyes met Candace's thoughtfully. Two weeks felt like two years, at least, they did to Jameson. If Jameson had thought that life on the campaign trail was a whirlwind, life with the next president was nothing short of a hurricane. People blew in and out everywhere Candace was. There were decisions to be made every second. Jameson understood the situation. Candace had roughly nine weeks to assemble a cabinet and secure her closest advisers. The daily briefings she received were longer than they had ever been as governor or on the campaign trail. She frequently spoke with President Wallace. Amid what Jameson was certain were pressing national security concerns, domestic issues, and policy foibles, Candace also had to deal with the organization of an Inauguration, writing a speech, making appearances on and off, providing input regarding the private living quarters of The White House, and preparing the family for a transition like no other. On top of it, tomorrow was Thanksgiving. Candace and Jameson would be leaving New York on Sunday and taking up residence at the townhouse they owned in Virginia. That decision had been made more for Cooper's benefit. Cooper would be attending a new school. Candace wanted him to adjust as much as possible before they moved into that big white house.

"I know you have a million things to do," Jameson offered.

"True," Candace admitted. "The kids will all be here tomorrow and then..."

"And then the chaos becomes mania?"

Candace grinned. "Something like that." She wrapped her arms around Jameson's neck. "Do you want the truth?"

"Please."

"Marianne is right."

"I'm okay, Candace."

"I know you are," Candace said, surprising Jameson with the assuredness on her voice. "I know," she repeated. "I'm okay too. I've never been one to settle for that—not for long."

Jameson chuckled. True.

"I don't know if you need it, but I need some time with you—just you. Just you and me without any of the kids or the world looking in."

"What do you suggest?" Jameson asked.

"I sent Dana home. I sent Grant home. Marianne is headed to Scott's in an hour. She offered to have Cooper spend the night there. She'll be here with the kids early tomorrow morning so..."

"So? It's just you and me?"

Candace smiled.

Jameson let out a sigh of relief. "Candace..."

Candace's lips found Jameson's. "I don't want you to worry about what I need to do. What I need is you," Candace said.

"And some Chinese take-out?"

"I wouldn't say no."

Jameson laughed. "I'm sold."

"That quickly?" Candace teased.

"Well, if you want me to go up on my rates..." Jameson's thought was silenced by a kiss. "On second thought."

Candace closed her eyes and let her head fall onto Jameson's shoulder. "Thank you."

Jameson closed her eyes. "How do you feel about a nap?"

"You're already putting me to bed?"

Jameson opened her eyes and grinned. She stood up still holding Candace.

"You are nuts," Candace laughed.

"So, you've said." Jameson carried Candace into the living room and toward the stairs.

"Jameson! Put me down, you lunatic, before you hurt yourself."

Marianne peeked around the corner and rolled her eyes. "I hope the Secret Service isn't opposed to Bible Study." She laughed when she heard her mother's voice again.

"Jameson!"

"Be quiet, Nana," Jameson said.

Marianne rolled her eyes. "God help The White House."

"I want to know what we can expect from this woman."

"She's thorough."

"Unlike Wallace?"

Petru Rusnac shrugged. "She's not Wallace."

"Obviously. What does that mean going forward?"

"The new president is a mystery to all of us."

"I pay you to solve mysteries, not to find them."

"That may be," Rusnac said. "I cannot tell you how deeply connected she is. She shares a close

relationship with Jane Merrow.”

A furrowed brow raised.

Rusnac sighed. “Yuri,” he began cautiously. “It will take time to assess Mrs. Reid.”

“We do not have time. This is not a game. We need to move now.”

“That might prove unwise without more information.”

“Then decode the mystery.”

Rusnac nodded. The last person he wanted to cross was Yuri Sokolov. Sokolov had replaced Viktor Ivanov at the helm of Advance Strategic Applications. ASA was a technology company based in Moscow whose business interests extended far beyond the company mission statement. It served as a front for the Russian SVR. Its roots planted at the end of World War II had grown into tentacles stretching across the globe. ASA had invested in Bradley Wolfe’s bid for the US presidency in every way imaginable. Its surrogates had waged a disinformation campaign, funneled money to Wolfe’s campaign, paid for ads through corporate and diplomatic loopholes, and mustered the support of its allies in the states to discredit Candace Reid. The Governor of New York’s ascension to the highest seat of power in the world was less than ideal. She was a known quantity as a legislator. How she would react when presented with intelligence and military options remained a puzzle for nearly everyone. Rusnac’s wealth and all that came with it continued at the pleasure of the man seated before him. He had failed in the task he had been given. Now, he needed to prove his worth.

“What is it you want to know?” Rusnac asked.

“Everything.”

Candace leaned back into Jameson’s embrace and sipped a glass of wine. Jameson had built a fire and ordered Chinese take-out as promised. It was the perfect evening. Candace would miss her time in Schoharie. It was her haven; the place she felt the most at ease.

Jameson’s lips tenderly brushed against Candace’s neck.

“Thank you,” Candace whispered.

“For?”

“This. I missed you, Jameson.”

“I’m right here.”

“I know.”

“Regrets?” Jameson asked.

"No, not regrets."

"But?"

"Realities," Candace said. Her fingertips played gently over Jameson's forearm.

"Want to talk about it?"

"There are so many potential issues," Candace said. "And, some of them have no easy solutions."

Jameson pulled Candace a little closer.

"I knew that. I understood that when I decided to do this. It's just... Now? Now, it's on my plate. It's in my hands. People don't always understand that what we do—what happens behind the facades that people see; it matters, Jameson."

"I know it does."

"Sometimes, I wonder what drives people. I think I know, and then I'm presented with some insane plot to cause injury to innocent people... I want to understand. I know that without seeking understanding, I can't make the difference I need to make."

"But?"

"But sometimes there is no time to look for common ground or to search for reasons."

Jameson let her head fall against Candace's. "I wish I could tell you that I can imagine how you feel. I can't. I can tell when you are battling with yourself. I can feel when you are struggling. You always find a way to pull people together, Candace. You do it with this family every day."

"I don't know about that."

"What happened today?"

"Nothing new," Candace replied. She moved to face Jameson. "I need this."

Jameson smiled.

"It's what keeps me steady. I need you to remind me of that."

Jameson bit her lower lip.

"Even if I bite your head off for doing that," Candace said.

"Noted," Jameson replied. "I can handle your worst."

"I'm not sure if I should take that as an insult or thank you."

"Your worst is better than anyone else's best," Jameson said.

Candace's eyes twinkled. "Are we talking about my temper?"

“Among other things.”

Candace laughed. “You really are a lunatic.”

“Open your fortune cookie,” Jameson said.

“Why? Hoping I’ll get something you can add ‘in bed’ to and make kinky?”

“I wouldn’t complain about getting lucky.”

“You don’t need a fortune cookie to get lucky,” Candace quipped.

Jameson took the wine glass from Candace’s hand and set it aside. She placed a tender kiss on Candace’s lips and handed her a fortune cookie. “Open it.”

Candace raised a brow but did as Jameson directed. She cracked open the cookie and pulled out the small white paper slowly. A new voyage will fill your life with untold memories. Candace looked at Jameson and smiled.

“What does it say?”

“Something tells me you know the answer to that question?”

“Maybe I do,” Jameson confessed. “You’ve said the word ‘sometimes’ a lot tonight. Maybe sometimes you need to be reminded that you are the best person for this job.”

Candace closed her eyes as Jameson’s lips found hers again. Jameson understood her, not only the emotions and insecurities that she struggled with at times, but also when she needed to find the confidence to carry on. Most people looked at Candace and saw a stateswoman—a successful, powerful, controlled woman. Jameson witnessed the truth. The truth was raw and vulnerable—real—human. Confidence was not the opposite of doubt; it was the ability to press on despite questions. Confidence was born of perseverance. No one lived without insecurity. No one existed without fear. Leading required the determination to act in the face of those human frailties. Every person needed a place to voice fear, sadness, and the endless questions that seemed to have no answers—even a president. Candace had yet to assume that role. Day by day she gained a better understanding of what her life would entail. She needed Jameson to be her refuge. That had always been clear to her. She’d received a stark reminder earlier in the day. She needed the president-elect to fade away into the wife and mother that Jameson loved.

Jameson’s hands tenderly caressed Candace’s arms as their kiss deepened. Had she felt lonely? No. She hadn’t. She was certain that Candace had.

Candace was surrounded by people twenty-four hours a day. She could scarcely enter a public bathroom without someone accompanying her. Candace seemed to take it all in stride. Jameson could see the evidence of strain on her wife’s face. Candace was suddenly immersed in the details of the issues she would need to address and be accountable for the moment she took her oath of office. Solace was found in simple moments—in fortune cookies, fireplaces, children’s stories, and grandchildren’s antics. And, it was found in each other.

“Jameson,” Candace sighed.

Jameson lowered Candace to the floor, hovering above her, searching her eyes, and smiling lovingly. It amazed Jameson; the way a simple moment of silence could transform a person.

Making love with Candace would not suddenly bequeath either of them with any all-encompassing answer to life's questions. It would provide perspective. It would serve as a reminder that when the noise of contentious opinions and countless requests quelled, there remained one over-arching truth—Jameson would always love Candace, and Candace would always seek Jameson for comfort.

"I love you," Jameson promised.

Candace held Jameson's gaze as Jameson's hands deftly relieved her of her blouse. She watched as Jameson's eyes lowered and heard Jameson's sharp intake of breath. Her fingertips threaded through the soft wave of Jameson's hair, loving every moment of Jameson close to her. Nothing on earth moved Candace the way it did to watch Jameson looking at her. She had once thought that time might diminish the emotion she witnessed in Jameson's eyes. There was no force on earth that would ever succeed in doing that. Candace felt that reality course through her again, astounding her with its veracity. Her eyes closed against the sensation of Jameson's lips caressing the swell of her breasts. Jameson's touch felt like a gentle breeze caressing the treetops in springtime. So, gentle.

Jameson fingertips traced the path her lips had just traversed. She pulled Candace to sit and cast aside the bra that separated her from the treasure below. She ached to touch Candace, to feel the softness of Candace's skin against her lips. She looked up and met Candace's smiling face. Not for the first time, she wondered if anyone had ever loved a person as deeply as she loved Candace. Candace's presence consumed her. Thought was swept away by emotion. Reason? Candace was the reason—the reason Jameson looked forward to every day of her life. She loved everything about the woman smiling at her, from the crinkles at the corner of her eyes to the boisterous laughter that erupted from Candace without warning. She treasured Candace's intellect and marveled at her wife's compassion. It was strange to realize that most of the world saw Candace Reid as a distant figure, a character that somehow lacked dimension. Everything about Candace was real. She possessed endless layers. Jameson's lips met Candace's tentatively, gradually beginning to explore and deepen their connection. How had she managed to become the person Candace chose to share her life with? She'd pondered that question a few times. Tonight, it seemed to surface with a new intensity.

Candace gentled their kiss and held Jameson's face in her hands. "What is it?"

Jameson wet her lips and shook her head, unable to find any words.

"Jameson..."

"I love you so much, Candace. I know that I say it. I know that you've heard it. I'm not sure you will ever understand."

Candace caressed Jameson's cheek with her thumb. "I do," she promised. "I feel the same way." She pulled Jameson's shirt over her head and tossed it away. Her eyes never left Jameson's as she continued to undress her. "Stay with me," she requested.

Jameson understood. She lowered them both to the floor again. Jameson's fingertip traced patterns cast by the flickering of the flames across Candace's skin. Her lips followed closely behind, falling like cool raindrops against the heat from the fire. She heard Candace sigh and let her mouth descend over a taut nipple. The instant arch of Candace's hips spoke directly to Jameson's heart. Sometimes, touch was the only way to convey what coursed between them. Words had their time and their purpose. Often, only the sensation of Candace against her could satisfy the yearning that burned deep within her soul. She enveloped Candace in her arms. The heat from the crackling fire

and the softness of Candace against her aroused Jameson. Her lips tasted Candace's neck and meandered lower as they began to glide sensually against each other. Candace's perfume tickled her nose. She breathed in the scent, savoring the way it caused her heart to beat slightly out of time. Candace's hands fell over her back tenderly, moving in long strokes, pulling Jameson closer.

Dear God. Candace held onto Jameson. Jameson's lips surrounded her nipple, a playful graze of Jameson's teeth took her breath away. A fingertip danced over her collarbone as Jameson's mouth continued its thorough exploration of her breasts. Candace fell away into a well of sensation; a well that overflowed and spilled out everywhere around them, between them, even through them. She would drown here and never regret it. Jameson would always pull her back to the surface. After all, wasn't that the most glorious part of making love? Lost one moment, desperate and searching; found in the next, cradled and comforted; making love with Jameson was always that way.

Jameson's hand found the softness between Candace's legs. Soft, warm, wet from desire—it spurred Jameson's need. She glanced up to a sight unlike any other. Candace.

Candace's head had fallen back exposing her throat. Her eyes were shut tightly; her lips parted in anticipation. Barely audible sighs mixed with sensual moans, carrying to Jameson's ears like chords in a beautiful melody. There was no sight on earth that compared to Candace in the throes of passion. Sunsets, sunrises, mountains, and oceans be damned; the most breathtaking vision in creation was laid before Jameson now.

Tenderly, Jameson entered Candace. A guttural moan rewarded her. Jameson entered Candace gently at first; deeper and harder with each thrust until Candace's hips rotated to meet her endeavor. A flurry of kisses rained over Candace's stomach to her hip, until finally Jameson's tongue languidly traveled over her center, lingering when it met with the fingers still twirling inside her. Candace might not survive this night after all. Quivers erupted in her core, spreading like sparks through every nerve in her body. Tingles ran over her skin. Was it the heat of the fire or the heat from Jameson's tongue? Maybe it was the feel of Jameson's breasts against her thigh, or perhaps, it was the fullness of Jameson's fingers as they continued to press deeper that was responsible. It was all of it, every tiny sensation meeting the other like instruments in a symphony. One played a beautiful note; together they created a haunting refrain that echoed through Candace's being. Her hands gripped Jameson's shoulders as the crescendo that heralds the end of a melody built steadily within her.

Jameson relished the sights, the sounds, and the taste that was uniquely Candace. She continued her tender assault, in and out, up and down; her other hand reached for Candace's breast. She delighted in the tremors that began the moment her fingertip brushed across Candace's nipple. She ceased her teasing and sucked delicately on Candace's clit until the tremors broke like waves, crashing violently over and over, one behind the other.

Candace's body lifted from the floor. She was certain the only thing that kept her from levitating was the weight of Jameson's body on hers. She called out Jameson's name repeatedly. Jameson would not relent. "Oh, God... Jameson... Jesus Christ!"

Jameson licked and played and teased until Candace shuddered beneath her again. She could do this forever.

Candace couldn't stand another moment. She wanted Jameson above her. She wanted to taste Jameson, to make her quiver and shake until she had no choice but to fall into Candace's waiting arms. She tugged on Jameson's shoulders. Jameson's lips met hers. Candace groaned. Everything about Jameson was sexy. Jameson's tongue explored her mouth just as it had peeked her arousal

seconds ago. She pushed Jameson away slightly, and licked her lips.

"Yes?" Jameson asked.

"I want to taste you right now."

Jameson thought she would orgasm right there. Lust blazed in Candace's eyes, hotter than the flames of the fire a few feet away.

Candace guided Jameson above her. She loved to place Jameson here, where she could reach her hands up and toy with Jameson's nipples while her mouth explored all that Jameson had to offer. She greeted Jameson eagerly. Tonight, she had no desire to prolong Jameson's torture. She desired to release Jameson, to feel Jameson let go of all control.

"Candace," Jameson moaned her wife's name. "Oh, that... Oh, my God... Yes..."

Jameson was gone. Candace took her over the edge. Her fingers tugged at Jameson's nipples, and her tongue swirled around Jameson's clit repeatedly, tenderly but firmly.

"Candace!"

Jameson grabbed hold of the couch with one hand to keep from losing her balance. She had no intention of pulling away. As long as Candace wanted to keep her suspended, she would oblige.

"Mmm." Candace felt her arousal building again. Every quiver from Jameson's body seemed to cause a tremor in Candace. She felt Jameson beginning to succumb again and dropped her hand to touch herself. She couldn't stand the ache any longer. She needed to crest and fall with Jameson.

Jameson's heart thundered in her ears. She could feel Candace touching herself and it sent shock waves through her. She wished she could watch Candace now, but Candace would never allow it. Desire silenced all Jameson's inhibitions. "You're touching yourself," she panted. The only response from Candace was a desperate moan. "Oh, God... I wish I could watch you," Jameson confessed.

Candace almost lost it. Jameson seldom spoke unprompted when Candace touched her. She struggled to voice her desires. Tonight, it seemed, she was at their mercy. It made Candace crave release. She prayed Jameson's voice would continue to reach her ears.

"Yes," Jameson hissed. She swirled her hips over Candace's face. "Please," she nearly begged. "Candace... I want you to make yourself come with me... Please... God, I want you... I want to feel you.... Oh!" Jameson's words sent them both over the edge of sanity.

Candace shifted and accepted Jameson into her arms.

"Jesus," Jameson sighed.

Candace chuckled. "Finding God?"

Jameson looked at Candace. "Hey, I like this version of Bible Study."

"You're nuts."

"I love you."

"I love you too," Candace replied. She looked at Jameson curiously. "What are you thinking?"

"I hope all the fireplaces work in The White House."

Candace burst out laughing. "All of them?"

Jameson nodded.

"A little ambitious?"

"Nah. There's twenty-eight. We'll be there for forty-eight months. That's like what? About 1.7 fireplaces a month. Doable."

Candace stared at Jameson for a moment before laughing again. "Lunatic."

"Hey, you're not the only one with plans."

"Thank God." Candace pulled Jameson close and let her eyes close.

"Do you want to go upstairs?" Jameson asked.

"Not yet."

"Okay.... So, which one do you want to try out first?" Jameson asked.

Candace shook with laughter. "You're the architect, honey. Draw up a plan."

Jameson grinned and snuggled against Candace. "I will."

I have no doubt.

CHAPTER TWO

"Are you sure about this?" Grant asked.

Candace was growing tired of that simple question.

"I'm just asking," he said, sensing her displeasure.

"Nate and I have discussed this at length," she said. "We both agree that Senator Gorham is the best choice for Secretary of State."

Grant nodded.

“Unless there is something I don’t know that I should know, that is my decision.”

“No, there’s not. Jenny is a logical choice.”

“Jenny Gorham is more than a logical choice, Grant. She’s one of the most well-versed people on foreign policy in leadership today. And, she happens to speak four languages fluently. That’s an enormous bonus on the world stage.”

“And, she’s a woman.”

“Your point?”

“Did that tip the scales in her favor? I think some people will ask that.”

“Some people will ask a lot of things.”

Grant groaned. “Candy...”

Candace held up her hand. “Don’t. Gender is neither a qualifying or disqualifying factor in this administration. You, of all people, should know that.”

“This isn’t about what I know.”

“Then what is it about?”

“Whether you like it or not, perception still matters.”

Candace took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. She understood with crystal clarity how important optics were on the world stage. Like it or not, optics mattered. Optics were also a fickle thing. People perceived any situation differently based on their firmly held convictions and embedded beliefs. No candidate, no leader, and no president would ever be able to create perfect “optics.” She’d attempted to school her staff in that reality. At times, it seemed that remedial lessons were called for. That frustrated Candace. She listened thoughtfully to the guidance of her advisers, both at work and at home. She listened. When she made a decision, it was solid. Spending time explaining her reasoning or debating her choices was not a luxury she was afforded. Each day, Candace received nearly the same security briefing President Wallace did. Every morning, she listened to and accepted calls from congressional and foreign leaders seeking her support and offering theirs. And, in the afternoon she engaged in meetings to formalize her inauguration. She was grateful that Jameson had taken control of their move to Washington DC. While she still needed to address details regarding their living quarters, Jameson had handled nearly everything. That took a few hours off each day. Each day seemed to be composed of forty-eight hours of tasks poured into twenty-four hours of time. She did not appreciate revisiting decisions that required no further discussion.

“Grant,” she began evenly. “I think we need to establish something.”

“What’s that?”

“I love you, and I am grateful for your insight and your candor.”

“But?”

“I told you; as I told everyone during the campaign; when I make a decision, unless there is some

earth-shattering information that makes that decision perilous, I don't have the time to revisit it." She held up her hand to stop his oncoming thought. "Ultimately, the success or the failure of any decision in my administration will rest with me, just as it did during the campaign. I expect that everyone on my team is honest with me. And, I welcome spirited debate—when we are in that phase of the decision-making process. That process has an end. It's called the decision. I take everything that's offered to me into consideration. Once I have made that decision, I expect respect for the conclusion I have reached. The government has enough built-in redundancies. We can't afford to create more."

"I'm only trying to look out for you."

Candace smiled. Grant was like a son to her. His eyes had lowered, reminding her of a child who had been reprimanded. Sometimes, governing mirrored parenting a great deal. She would forever be amazed at how adults could transform into small children. She often felt the same way in Pearl's presence. "I realize that. You need to trust that when I've arrived at my decision, it's been through plenty of internal debate. Jenny isn't just a logical choice. She's the right choice for this administration. Optics matter, Grant. They fade into nothingness if they lack any substance behind them." *

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