



# PRESIDENTIAL



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# DEDICATION

For everyone who's ever poured their heart and soul into a political campaign, only for the bad guys to win anyway. We will come out the other side of all this.



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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At various points since conceiving this book, I've debated whether to go darker, to make the right-wing side of politics as dark and devious as it is in the present day. I thought we could all use a break from that. My first big fandom loves were *The X-Files* and *The West Wing*, so I lean into their more noble ideals of politics: that broadly people want to do good, but a few bad apples spoil the bunch.

I can't let this book into the world without acknowledging the profound influence of Aaron Sorkin on this and so much of my writing. I hope I've lived up to that standard in some small way.

# CHAPTER 1

EMILY PULLED THE SURGICAL MASK from her face and scrunched it up as she approached the small cluster of people in the waiting room.

They in turn looked up at her as though she had parted the sea, hanging on her every step, her still too-new running shoes squeaking against the linoleum of the hospital floor. Emily took a deep breath, her lungs filling and her nose tickling with those universal hospital scents of antiseptic, bleach, and the residual hints of all they tried to cover up. She flexed her fingers, hours of precise work having left her knuckles pale, faint blue veins showing more noticeably through white skin.

Emily hated this part of the job more than any other. It was the one area she felt she had never improved on, from the first time to that very day.

The hope in their eyes as they saw her, so convinced she had been the hero, only for the spark in each face to fade as they registered her serious expression and defeated posture. Emily tried her best to keep her back straight and her chin up, but after hours in the operating room, her body was crying out for a comfortable surface and a hot cup of coffee.

“Thank you all for waiting, I’m sorry that I don’t have better news for you. As you know, it was a risky operation—”

The explanation was interrupted by a familiar wail of grief from her patient’s mother, instinct racing ahead of the careful words falling from Emily’s lips. After that, she only had the details to cling to, carefully sanitized and spoken as gently as she knew how.

Eventually, with her final sad obligation complete, Emily had to face the long and lonely march back to the attendings’ locker room. Although

still in her first week as head of cardio at Blackwell Memorial Hospital—with arguably the finest pediatric surgery unit in the country—Emily had already familiarized herself with most of the relevant corridors and rooms that she would need. The locker room came second in importance only to the operating rooms, because it was the rare space that doctors could step away from interruptions, grab a restorative shower, or shrug off the navy-blue scrubs that were clinging to her skin after hours of exertion, even though the surgical suite was kept rigorously cool.

Sitting on the pine bench, Emily leaned back until her head bumped the surface of her locker. Her hair coming loose from the neat bun that tucked into her surgical cap, snagged on the metal door, but she made no move to detangle herself.

Just a minute, and she would hit the showers.

Then she could face putting on her office clothes, grab some breakfast, and go home to her barely unpacked townhouse and sleep it off. She had been on call all weekend, so Monday morning meant a kind of freedom. The prospect of deep sleep was so close she could practically taste it. Her eyes stung with unshed tears, but she'd lost enough patients in her career to know that the real impact would come later, in the privacy of her own space. Instead, Emily settled for replaying the crucial moments of the operation in her head, silently reassuring herself that she had done all she could.

As a sense of calm returned, the locker room door swung open, and a familiar face appeared. Dima had been working here in Washington, D.C. since they graduated medical school, completing her residency and fellowships with similar acclaim to Emily's own. With a less close friend, Emily might have worried about jealousy when being brought in over her as head of department, but the worst Dima had come up with was a very mocking tone when calling Emily 'boss'.

"Hey, boss lady." There it was, just a hint of teasing to it. "They want you for a VIP, or their kid, anyway. Above my pay grade, apparently." Dima eased her way into the room, tall and broad-shouldered. Without her scrub cap on, the array of gold jewelry on both ears was visible, glinting in the fluorescent lights against the kind of trendy undercut that Emily had never dared try. Dima jokingly referred to her own complexion as a Siberian suntan, and her white skin did give the impression she had never knowingly been exposed to sunshine.

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“Ugh, what kind of VIP? In New York that would have normally just meant some finance guy trying to jump the line.”

“Well, this is Washington, so you can be pretty sure it’s a politician most of the time. This morning is a little different, though. That’s why they need you.”

Emily gave a wan smile and got back on her feet. If they wanted her so urgently, they’d have to take her in this post-surgical state.

“You get used to it—all the D.C. nonsense” Dima had one of those broad smiles that could put the sky falling into perspective. “I’ll give you a moment to change.”

Emily had been ready to march out there in wrinkled scrubs and shoes that had spent hours on her feet as she’d stood over her patient. Instead, she yanked off what she was wearing, shoving the scrubs into the laundry bag and pulling on the simple black wrap dress she’d worn yesterday. The comfortable sneakers were bagged up and shoved in her locker, with sensible burgundy flats taking their place. As a final concession, Emily pulled her hair down from its few deft pins and ran her fingers through it a few times.

“Professional enough?”

“Don’t forget the white coat,” Dima said, nodding to where one hung in Emily’s locker, more freshly dry-cleaned and waiting in her office, no doubt. Her name and qualifications were stitched over the pocket, and she slipped her stethoscope around her neck to complete the look.

“This way,” Dima said, holding the door open after stepping through it.

Emily followed along in her wake, trying to keep up with the longer strides.

The faintest hint of Dima’s native Russian accent remained around the vowels. She rarely talked about her home country, having come to America to study and never looked back. “There’s a reason they call it a company town. But this is the first unscheduled visit for this patient in a while, so everyone is scrambling a little. Plus, Monday morning.”

“So, who are we talking about?” Emily had been patient enough, but her curiosity finally got the better of her.

“Protocol says no VIP patient names in public areas,” Dima replied, a stickler for the rules most of the time. Maybe Emily should have known



that, as department head. “And for this particular level, it’s codename only. Even on the paperwork”

“Right. But if it’s so urgent, why wasn’t I pulled out of my morning surgery? Not to mention why their own doctor isn’t on top of this.” Emily had a hundred things to do, not least process the loss on the table. Derailing her morning to prescribe more Viagra to a senator under the guise of checking on his grandkid was not worth the disruption.

Dima stopped outside the last room in the corridor, right next to the emergency exit, where two black-suited armed guards stood like statues. Very alert statues that looked Emily and Dima up and down with the cold, dispassionate but thorough gaze of a computer scanner.

“Well, that’s the thing. You replaced them. As head of cardiac surgery and as the most senior pediatric surgeon. And I’m sure you know that your appointment has created quite a stir, boss.”

“Oh, please tell me we’re not selling me with the whole youngest woman head of department schtick again, are we? I told the board when I accepted the job that surgery was my priority, not marketing opportunities. I’m not here to be a poster girl, Dima.”

Dima gave a shrug.

Emily sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “How old is the patient?”

“Twelve years old, I believe. He’s waiting just in here.”

Even without caffeine, Emily felt her neurons firing. Like a heavy bowling ball rattling down the lane, the realization was barreling down on her, and she had no hope of stepping out of its way. Only one twelve-year-old child came with the unmistakable presence of Secret Service agents. Which meant Emily would be treating none other than Zachary Calvin, the sitting president’s only son.

Great. No pressure, then. Not that Emily placed much stock on the status of her patients, it was all just medicine to her. But so-called important people came with a lot of additional hoops to jump through, not to mention the paperwork.

“Okay, anything else I need to know?”

Dima handed over the tablet she had been clutching. “It’s all in here.”

“Of course,” Emily said. She flipped through the first couple of pages, scanning the relevant terms that jumped out at her. Her failed surgery was still playing on her mind, so she dug deep to summon the public persona

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of Dr. Emily Lawrence, MD PhD, graduate of Princeton and Harvard, and reached for the door handle.

It remained stubbornly locked.

“Here,” Dima said, grabbing the key card that hung on a lanyard around Emily’s neck. “This will get you in just about everywhere. Being the boss and all.”

Emily gave Dima a wry smile before entering the treatment room. She accepted her fate with a sigh. “Just another patient,” she said under her breath.

“There you are! Honestly, the service in this hospital is getting slower with each visit.” The white woman who blindsided Emily was all of five feet tall, dressed smartly in black, with a short, dyed black pixie cut that had not a single strand out of place. Emily would have guessed the woman to be in her fifties, but given that she was the president’s mother-in-law, that math just didn’t add up. She had to be in her seventies, because hadn’t President Calvin just turned fifty the year before?

“Mrs...Calvin? I’m Dr. Emily Lawrence. I’m sorry for the wait, but I had to speak with the family of my last patient.” She turned her attention to the young man waiting patiently by the window. “You must be Zachary. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

He was tall for twelve, his white skin lightly tanned in that way only rich kids seemed to be, lean and lanky in a way that didn’t resemble his grandmother at all. In a smart school polo with a fancy crest on the chest pocket, and cargo shorts that were ironed within an inch of their life, his auburn curls were close-cropped and immaculately styled.

“You can call me Zach. Everyone else does. Zachary is for when I’m in trouble.” He crossed the small space between them and offered a tentative hand to shake. A little charmed, Emily accepted with a firm grip.

“You’ve missed a few days of school. Your notes mention flu-like symptoms.”

Zach shrugged. “Not like it’s the first time. It’s just a bug, right?”

Working in pediatrics, Emily was all too familiar with that jaded tone of long-term patients. Zach had spent his whole life talking about his heart and his health, whether he wanted to or not. Emily considered herself pretty good with children, but it always stung to see anyone so young be so worn down by it all.

“You probably know just as much as I do about your condition by now, so can I start with listening to your chest? If that is all clear then we can skip some of the other tests. We have the EKG right here and ready to roll.” Emily smiled at Zach as she said it, but there was no mistaking the way Mrs. Calvin bristled at the suggestion.

“I don’t know how you plan on running your department, but Zachary will have every necessary test performed. We don’t believe in cutting corners.”

“Of course,” Emily replied. “And while aortic coarctation is a serious condition, it’s clear that Zach here has been doing everything he should to keep himself healthy. We know infections are always a concern, but he’s also a kid who goes out in the world where people are. Colds will happen.”

Mrs. Calvin did not look appeased in the slightest. Emily summoned up her most reassuring tones and continued.

“But we also don’t want to put him through unnecessary discomfort for no reason. I’m sure you can’t wait to get back to school and see your friends, right? With luck on our side, you’ll be back at your desk before homeroom is over.”

“Really?” Zach’s smile lit up his whole face. The resemblance to his mother, the president, was uncanny, even though he didn’t share her blonde hair. They had the same California glow about them, with high cheekbones and narrow noses.

“We aim to please.” Emily spoke with her usual authority, avoiding eye contact with his grandmother. “Healthcare shouldn’t be a chore, and you have better places to be than this hospital. As long as this EKG and the blood we’ve already taken come back clear, you’re ready for the big bad world again.”

Zach straightened up where he was sitting on the bed, ready for Emily and her stethoscope—hanging around her neck as always. She warmed it against her palm first, an old habit she’d learned from her own childhood doctor and pressed it against his chest as he lifted his shirt to allow it.

Emily knew heartbeats the way other people could hum classical music. She knew the familiar rhythm of a regular, steady beat, but more importantly she could hear a murmur or a skipped beat with unerring precision.

“Sounding good,” she said, giving Zach her most reassuring smile. “Whatever sneaky bug got hold of you seems to have cleared. And let me

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just look at your blood results here on the tablet—yes, I’m happy to clear you for a day of math and gym if this next reading is just as good.”

“I don’t take gym,” Zach replied. “Something about the school’s insurance. But I have a trainer who comes to work with me.”

“You could tell I was about to give you a lecture on the importance of exercise, couldn’t you?” Emily popped her stethoscope back around her neck, reaching for the trolley by the bed that held a brand-new EKG machine. The thing seemed barely out of its packaging.

“That’s new,” Zach said from behind her. “They always do this.”

“They do?”

“I guess because of my mom. But I think machines that have been used and that everyone knows are reliable are better. What if this shiny new one has a fault we don’t know about yet?”

“You don’t have to worry about that, because we test them a lot before a patient ever uses one,” Emily replied. “But if anything is off, I’ll know about it. But for what it’s worth, I do agree with you. I was at a county hospital before this, and seeing something fresh from the box like this? Well, that just didn’t happen. We were lucky when the thing even had a working screen.”

“Oh.” Zach looked down at his hands, clasped in his lap. “I’ve never been to that kind of hospital. Before this, it was in Sacramento.”

“When your mom was governor?”

Zach nodded. “And I think before that it was in Los Angeles, but I was too young to remember. That’s when I had the surgery, to make sure my aorta was open enough to send blood to my whole body. Mom says they couldn’t tell there was a problem until after I was born so...”

That was clearly too much for Mrs. Calvin, who set down the book she was pretending to read, having not so much as turned a page yet. “Usually, we prefer if staff don’t discuss Zachary’s mother with him. Security reasons. I’m sure you understand.”

Emily held her hands up, as though in surrender. “Understood. Let’s get these readings done, and all being well you can get out of here.”

She placed the sticky pads on Zach’s chest and back, smiling as she pressed the button to start taking a reading. She heaved a silent sigh of relief at seeing a normal sinus rhythm, just as she expected. Only after a few

strong beats did the spiky line register the murmur that Zachary had been born with, among his other conditions.

“Looking good,” Emily said, in her most reassuring voice. “You probably know when it sounds right and when it doesn’t.”

Zach nodded. His shoulders visibly relaxed as he watched the rhythms play out on the monitor. “Almost like a normal heart today.”

“Exactly. But try not to think of it as ‘normal’ or not. Every body, every person has their own unique health challenges. You just happened to get a fancy one.”

Mrs. Calvin seemed to be on the verge of another complaint, but they were all interrupted by a knock at the door and the entrance of an unmistakably fashionable and businesslike Black woman. It was none other than Rebecca Mason, CEO of the hospital and Emily’s new boss. This was one interruption Emily should have known to expect.

“Here we all are!” Rebecca beamed with her most professional smile. “How’s our favorite patient? Are you getting on with Dr. Lawrence, Zachary?”

“Yes, fine thank you.” He avoided eye contact. “She was just saying I could get back to school today.”

“That’s right,” Emily replied, patting Zach on the shoulder. He looked up at her with the hint of a smile. “And Zach knows that if anything changes he only has to call. We’re always here.”

Mrs. Calvin saw her opportunity. “I don’t know where you dragged up this doctor from, and I’m sure she was very popular wherever she studied cheerleading, but Zach’s previous physician was a board-certified surgeon who served two tours in Afghanistan.”

“Dr. Lawrence is also board certified, and she was recently named the top pediatric cardiologist by three different medical journals. And that’s top, nationally. We were very lucky to get her here in Washington.”

“I did have offers from New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles,” Emily said with false modesty. “But there was nowhere I’d rather be. This is a world-class department and hospital.”

“His mother will hear about this, you know. She might be busy, but she always has time to make sure her only child gets the best possible care. At all times.”

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Emily had never much been impressed by people pulling rank. She also was getting a little tired of kissing ass. “President Calvin doesn’t strike me as a woman who would make a fuss over nothing. I would think she’d be relieved to hear her son has a clean bill of health. Especially since she campaigned on single-payer healthcare and hasn’t made a move on it so far.”

Rebecca shot Emily a warning glare, gently taking the tablet from her.

It was Zachary who replied instead of his grandmother. “What does that mean?”

Emily pinched the bridge of her nose and stifled a sigh. She had waded right into the politics of it all after expressly telling herself she would simply treat the kid and get the hell out of there.

“Nothing, Zach. I’m not here to talk politics, just to get you back to school.”

“No, you meant something, what you said...”

Emily was not in the habit of lying to her patients, so why start now?

“It means a lot of people voted for President Calvin—”

“My mom.”

“Your mom, yes. A lot of people voted for her in a very tight election because she promised to finally do something real about healthcare in this country. Now we’re two years in, and so far, she hasn’t even made a speech about nurses, never mind passed any actual laws. Meanwhile, I had to tell a family this morning that we couldn’t save their child, and as well as dealing with their grief, at some point they’re going to get a huge bill from the hospital. The system is cruel.”

“Oh.” Zach nodded as he took in Emily’s explanation. The kid was thoughtful, she had to give him that. “I’m sorry about that.”

“Listen, none of this is your problem, kid. And the good news is your EKG looks fine.”

“This is entirely inappropriate.” Grandma Calvin was back on the case, bristling at Emily’s words. “Ms. Mason, do you let all your staff run amok like this?”

“Dr. Lawrence, could you step outside?” Rebecca’s tone made it clear that it wasn’t a question.

But Zach stepped in to defuse the situation. “Grandma, it’s fine. Like Mom always says, she works for the people. I don’t mind hearing about

what she's done right or wrong. Anyway, if these tests look good, am I okay to get back to school then?"

"Absolutely," Emily replied, crossing her arms over her chest. "I'd bet my medical license on it."

"Grandma. Please."

"Very well, let's get your agents to bring the car around. A full day of school for you, young man."

Emily took the tablet that Rebecca handed back to her, tapping to update the notes and signing off her discharge instructions for Zach. He was up on his feet in no time, clearly eager to get out of there. She could hardly blame him with all the time he had spent in clinics and hospitals in his young life.

"You have a good day at school now," Emily said to him, avoiding Rebecca's gaze. "Mrs. Calvin, thank you for bringing him in."

The Calvin family departed in a flurry of Secret Service agents, leaving Emily alone in the treatment room with Rebecca. The silence stretched out for an uncomfortable moment until Emily decided to get it over with.

"Okay, so maybe I could have kept my mouth shut on the perils of privatized medicine..."

"You think?" Rebecca gave a little sigh. "It's not like anyone is unaware of the reality, Em. You need to learn to pick your battles. And preferably don't piss off the White House if you can avoid it."

"I know, I know. On the plus side, how often do we really need to interact with these people? It's not like I'm going to bump into the president at Starbucks, is it?"

Rebecca smoothed out the sleeves of her tan-colored blazer, giving Emily a pointed look. "Speaking of exactly that, did you see the invitation to the White House for the Healthy Hearts program? You've been asked to speak on early childhood intervention."

"Come on, you know I hate that stuff. I'm here to cut, save patients, and run an efficient department."

"And part of that is generating good PR. Helps with fundraising, so we can help families like the one you met this morning cover their bills, for example. You only need to speak for a few minutes, and I'll be there with you. As your boss, might I remind you. Not as your sister-in-law."

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Emily groaned. Half the reason she'd accepted this post over all the others was the chance to live close to her only sister, Sutton. The fact that Sutton was married to Rebecca had made the decision slightly more complicated.

"Fine, I'll do your little speech. And then hopefully we won't need to deal with any Calvins again for a long time."

Emily shoved her phone in her pocket and headed back toward the locker room. A long, hot shower was next on her agenda, and everything else would simply have to wait.



## CHAPTER 2

SITTING ALONE IN THE OVAL Office was one of the few moments of peace left in President Constance Calvin's life. The phone wasn't ringing, the Secret Service agents were waiting discreetly outside each exit, and for just a minute or two, her schedule didn't have an appointment, meeting, or interruption of any kind. She had just returned from an early Situation Room briefing and nobody seemed to have noticed that fact just yet.

Connie laid her hands palms-down on the sturdy wooden desk she'd picked out from the Smithsonian's collection, closed her eyes, and took a deep, steadying breath. She let the background filter out, forcing herself to concentrate on her hands, noting the pale white skin contrasted with the almost bruised pink appearance of her knuckles, a sure sign she'd need to apply some lotion before the day was out. There was usually some tucked in the top drawer of her desk, but she made no move toward it.

Monday.

Another week, another set of challenges. Days that began before six every morning, and usually went on past midnight. Today alone she had more meetings than any one person could reasonably be expected to attend, but being responsible for so many complex, competing things? Hell, that had been the appeal of the job in the first place. She tucked a strand of blonde hair behind one ear and let the world filter back in.

Although the job itself was something of a calling for her, on that particular Monday, Connie found her primary thoughts lay far outside the White House—with Zach at the hospital appointment she hadn't been able to attend. Although she made every effort, there were always a few

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appointments she couldn't be present for, and not for the first time since her husband died, Connie had reason to be grateful to her mother-in-law for stepping up.

It would be another thirty minutes before they had anything to report, and Zachary had certainly looked and sounded much better as they had breakfast together. Still, ever since the defect in Zach's aorta had been spotted just days after his birth, Connie had never been entirely able to relax on the subject. Through surgeries, tests and constant monitoring, near miracles had been worked over the years to keep her boy alive and thriving. Still, losing her husband, Robert, to an unrelated cancer had been a terrible adjustment for both of them, and keeping Zach healthy had taken on a new level of solemn responsibility for her in the years since.

Raised voices disturbed her interlude of mindfulness. She moved toward her chief of staff's office next door—the source of the disturbance. Smoothing down the navy blazer she wore over a matching shift dress, Connie winced as yet another pair of heels pinched at her toes. No matter how much she insisted she could break in a few pairs to be comfortable, the staff who laid out her outfits each night seemed to keep coming up with an endless supply of brand-new designer heels that kept distracting her with painful annoyance.

“—so that's why we rearranged the lunch and the medal ceremony,” said Ramira Emanuel from behind her desk. Even before laying eyes on her, Connie knew that Ramira would be immaculately turned out, in a dark-hued shift dress and blazer, a steady rotation of which had become a sort of uniform for her, covering most of her Brown bronzed skin, barely dulled by the long days stuck in the White House.

It was in stark contrast to the bright colors Ramira had preferred before their time in Washington, much as her caramel-hued highlights were a far more Beltway-approved version of her dramatic hairstyles over the years. Sometimes it was hard to believe they'd come all the way from being two Californian imports rooming together at Yale, but here they were, still best friends since the very first week of law school.

Connie watched from the doorway, unnoticed by the rest of her staff. In a reflective mood, she loved to play observer and see her staff at their uninhibited best. “Anyone else have anything to add before we're in with

the president? I don't want the senior staff meeting overrun with trivial questions again."

"I don't think that two mass shootings in three days is trivial," Asha Kohli, deputy chief of staff, replied to her boss. She clutched her tablet to her chest, smartly dressed in a charcoal gray pantsuit that complemented her long, dark hair and Brown skin. "I'd expect that to be top of the agenda, Ramira."

"No, we need a firm answer on the immigration protests at the Arizona border first," Darius Morgan, the communications director, answered from where he leaned against the far wall. His deep voice always drew attention, something Connie still wasn't used to. He was one of the newer members of her team, only brought in during the last months of her presidential campaign, but it was already hard to remember a time before he'd been the official voice of her administration. There had been murmurs from senior figures in the Democratic Party about whether a tall, handsome Black man was the right person for that role, but that had only increased Connie's resolve to appoint him once they were in the White House.

"Or maybe we could focus on more than one priority at a time," Connie said, making them all jump halfway out of their skins. Ramira got to her feet immediately, the deference automatic, no matter how many times Connie said the protocol wasn't necessary. "This is a big country, everyone. We don't have the luxury of focusing on one thing above all others"

"Good morning, ma'am." Ramira came out from behind her desk, greeting Connie with the gentle pat on her upper arm that had replaced their usual warm hugs during office hours. "How is Zachary?"

"I hope he knows we're all rooting for him," Darius added with a nod toward Connie. "Some of the staff had a whip-round, and they've sent up some new games to keep him occupied before the weekend."

"I saw that, and that is very kind of you all," Connie replied. "He does seem much better though, just waiting for the sign-off from the hospital and he can get back into his normal routine this week."

"Uh, I have a message here from your mother-in-law," Ramira said, running one hand through her hair, which fell right back into place as soon as she stopped touching it. If they weren't best friends, Connie could have hated her for that perfect hair alone. "It seems the hospital has a new head

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of cardiology, and that's who saw Zachary. She thought the appointment was a bit rushed."

Connie straightened her shoulders at the news. It was bad enough she had to skip appointments for work, but changes like that were normally communicated in advance. "Do we know this doctor? Is Zach okay with that?"

"Dr. Emily Lawrence. It says here the hospital appointed her last month, but she only started this week," Elliot said, piping up from their spot by the window. Connie disguised her jump at the sudden interjection, but Elliot had a long track record of sitting quietly in meetings, only to surprise her. Shorter than everyone else in the room, they hung back by the large picture window, dressed sharply in a royal blue button-down with light gray slacks. "There's been a press release—the hospital seems quite proud of recruiting her"

"How do you manage to find answers before I've even formed the question?" Ramira said, tapping on her phone with a thoughtful expression. "I think she's on the list of speakers for our Heart Health event, actually."

Elliot continued without looking up from their phone. "She's the youngest department head in the hospital's history, and the first woman to hold the position. She's in her late thirties, but I guess it's true what they say about doctors looking younger these days. Either that or she has an excellent skincare regime."

Connie didn't want internet searches and official headshots. She wanted to know her son was all right. Pulling out the private cell phone she rarely used, she called him. Maybe he would still be on the way to class and be able to talk.

"Can the rest of you give us a minute?" She gestured to the door.

"Yes, ma'am," came the chorus in response as Darius, Asha, and Elliot stepped out into the hallway.

"He would have called if anything had upset him," Ramira said as soon as they were alone. She remained standing.

"No, not if he thought it would disturb my morning. He is getting more and more careful about what he tells me." Connie motioned with her head toward the Oval Office, not in the least surprised when Ramira instantly fell in step behind her as they changed rooms. Most of the time, this part

of the building ran with the reliability of a Swiss watch, and unspoken communication like that was a vital part of it.

“That’s how he ended up sick this time. He thought it was just a sniffle and didn’t want to worry me.” Connie said as Connie took a seat on one of the couches that framed the presidential seal on the carpet. Ramira sat down on the opposite one. “And why did my mother-in-law not contact me directly? She is one of the few people who can, and still she sends messages through the staff. If she was not so good with Zach, if they didn’t both miss Robert so damn much...”

“Nobody can run a country as a single parent,” Ramira reminded her with a perfectly benign smile. “At least, not without some excellent support. Paid staff do wonders, but there’s nothing like family. Especially if you want some form of ordinary life in the middle of all this.”

Connie groaned. “My mother-in-law is what passes for ordinary? We are truly through the looking glass.”

Zach finally picked up, just as Connie was about to give up on her second attempt.

“Mom? I’m about to go into class.”

“I know, sweetheart. But I wanted to make sure your appointment went okay. Did you get the all-clear if you are already at school?”

“I thought grandma called?”

“Zachary, are you dodging the question?” Connie tapped her foot on the floor without meaning to. She loved her son, but there were few things in life more frustrating than a pre-teen who wasn’t in the mood for talking.

“I’m clear for school. I feel fine.”

Connie could hear his attention waning, the pull of his school friends far more interesting to him. “As long as you’re sure. Tell the agents if you feel ill, promise?”

“Promise.”

“I hear it was a new doctor. Was she good?”

“Mom—”

“Zachary.”

“She was fine. Nice, even. Didn’t keep me waiting for a bunch of pointless tests either. Plus, she totally called you out. Nobody ever does that in front of me.”

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“Excuse me?” Connie had just been ready to move on with her day, but there was no mistaking the mischief in Zach’s words. “Called me out for what, exactly? Missing the appointment?”

“Nah, everyone understands that. She just said that you haven’t done anything on healthcare, even though you campaigned on it. It was pretty cool, most people just want to kiss up.” A bell rang in the background. “Gotta go! Love you!” Zach mumbled the last part so that nobody but Connie could have understood it.

“Huh.” Connie looked to Ramira as she ended the call. “What was the name of Zach’s new doctor again?”

“Emily Lawrence. Did Zach say she was calling you out? Ma’am, we don’t really have time today to run around crushing medical professionals for dissent.”

“No, I don’t want to crush her,” Connie said. She shifted in her chair, pulling at the hem of her dress. “But if she is going to use appointments with my son as a political soapbox, then surely that is a security concern?”

“Not especially. Her background check was spotless. Was he upset about it?”

“He found it amusing, the little monster.”

“Well, ma’am. Right now, this is a footnote; only a handful of people know this exchange ever took place. It’s a match burning out in an empty trash can. If you respond personally, you’re pouring gasoline all over it. The press will no doubt catch wind, because someone always leaks these things.”

There was a knock at the door before Francesca, Connie’s executive assistant and gatekeeper, entered in her usual hurry. If Connie were a betting woman, she would have put money on an intruder getting past the Secret Service before they got past Francesca. And the Secret Service were armed.

“Have Darius book me on a friendly evening news show to talk about our healthcare plan. Well, a non-hostile one at least. They can come here since I’m trapped in the building all day today. Francesca will help with a spot in the schedule.”

“Ma’am?” Francesca looked up from the tablet she was cradling as if it were the original Declaration of Independence. Her hair was pulled back in its habitual bun, not one glossy black strand out of place, but her makeup seemed lighter than usual, no peachy hints on her white skin. Francesca shifted her weight from one hip to the other, the only slight indication she gave of the prosthesis that replaced the lower part of her left leg. The injury

from a roadside bomb had ended her military career, but not her time in public service.

“The president is going to be on television this evening. I’ll have the communications department liaise. We don’t want it in the Oval Office, though. Can you find a less formal space for it?” Ramira had snapped right into her usual organizing mode, and Connie relaxed at the sight.

They did not have to pick a fight with everyone who took a swing at them, but the last thing they should be doing at this point was alienating major groups on the left. Connie couldn’t deny a twinge of guilt that they hadn’t done anything significant to improve access to healthcare so far, but she was not about to hide the progress they had made either. Her late husband, Robert, had always maintained that the best way to win a battle was to make a friend out of an enemy. For once, Connie thought that advice might apply to politics.

“Of course.” Francesca could handle anything thrown at her, but she often did so with the sort of frown that was developing on her forehead, like an oncoming storm in miniature. With her short, spiky hair and wire-framed glasses, she always seemed as serious as she was capable. Sometimes Connie wondered if Francesca was the woman really running the country. She certainly ran Connie’s life, which might have amounted to the same thing.

“In the meantime, I’d better go find some medical gains for you to brag about,” Ramira said, taking her leave. “We must have funded some research or something cool by now.”

“If not, just make some up!” Connie called after her. “Francesca, can you arrange to have Zach come and hang out with me before the interview? I won’t get a chance to go up and look over his homework this afternoon, and you know I hate—“

“—Not seeing him until his bedtime. Got it. I’ll make the arrangements, ma’am.”

“Thank you, you are a lifesaver. Tell me, why have I not made you CIA director or something yet?”

Francesca gave Connie one of those appraising looks she seemed to have an endless supply of. “I imagine you’d fear a coup, Madam President. Shall I send your next meeting in?”

Connie nodded and walked back around her desk to sit in her chair. Time for another day of running the country.

## CHAPTER 3

“YOU’VE BEEN TO THE WHITE House before, right?” Rebecca asked as they approached the security station by the northwest gate. She already had a lanyard around her neck with the hospital branding, ready for a White House visitor pass.

“Uh, yeah. I mean, on a field trip.”

“Well, it was nice of them to invite us to this symposium, even if the whole thing will be overrun with health insurance lobbyists.” Rebecca seemed distracted as they waited their turn to sign the register and get patted down for their passes.

“At least you don’t have to speak in front of everyone,” Emily said, reaching for her driving license.

They were called next to go through security, which ended the small talk for a while. Emily copied Rebecca’s actions almost exactly, smiling as she handed over her ID and waited for check after check to be completed. Before too long, they were being escorted to the approved route for visitors.

“This used to be a lot easier,” Rebecca said. “When I first worked in DC, you could all but walk right in so long as your name was on a list. These days, security is as tight as a drum. Even more so with our first woman president. I mean, you know that just brought out all the worst people, don’t you?”

Emily had never considered that. So many people she’d met in the political world were obsessed with assassinations and even the attempts, but the topic had always left her queasy. Speculating about the trajectory of bullets and the motives of gunmen had never been just an academic exercise



for her, and anyone who knew her personal history was usually sensitive enough not to discuss that sort of thing around her. With a few notable and ugly exceptions.

“I’m just glad I haven’t been kicked off the approved list. Maybe nobody told the president I was questioning her record.”

Rebecca rolled her eyes. “Just try not to be too critical today. We rely on federal funding for a lot of our programs, and I don’t need my rockstar heart surgeon burning bridges all over town.”

The next half hour was a whirlwind of introductions. It seemed everyone in the room knew Rebecca from her various fundraising efforts and charity boards, and she insisted on introducing Emily to every last person. She was good with faces, but Emily knew she’d have forgotten half of the names before they wrapped the event.

Then came the brief ordeal of public speaking. Although Emily knew her topic inside out, there was still an edge of discomfort to standing up in front of an audience. She gave the facts as clearly as she could, and even got a laugh or two. With the job done, she checked her watch and wondered if she could get back in time to move up an elective surgery or two in the schedule.

Just as she was starting to think it might be nice to sneak off, the buzz in the room took a noticeable upturn.

“Something’s happening?” she asked Rebecca, who’d just reappeared with two glasses of sparkling water.

“I’d say the president must be on her way.” She assessed the air in the room like an explorer navigating by the winds.

“Won’t there be like...?” Emily didn’t want to give voice to the question, yet it persisted. “I mean, doesn’t the band sort of...?”

Rebecca gave a dignified snort instead of laughing in Emily’s face. “No, no. That’s only for formal occasions. The president doesn’t have entrance music everywhere she goes. She’s the head of state, not a professional wrestler.”

A door at the side of the room opened with a quiet click that most people ignored, but on high alert, Emily noticed it. She was rewarded by the sight of the chief of staff entering, phone pressed to her ear for a moment before she finished the call. Emily considered her options and decided she should seize the chance to officially put things right.

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“Ms. Emanuel?” she said in a low voice, surprised that she could sidle right up to her. As soon as Emily had that thought, she caught sight of at least three Secret Service agents watching them. Right. That was why a person didn’t even get in the room without a background check.

“Yes? Oh, you’re her.”

“Her?”

“The doctor who passes messages via the president’s son,” Ramira said, her grin wide and her eyes practically twinkling. “I hear you had quite a time of it with Mrs. Calvin. A very protective grandmother.”

“I really didn’t mean to be rude.” Emily drew herself up to her full height and still felt a bit short next to Ramira in her heels. “I just wanted to stress that I have the utmost respect for the president and everyone here. I mean, I did vote for her.”

“That’s a start.”

“But that’s not a four-year *carte blanche* either. It’s my job to provide the best possible care for my patients, and I can’t do that when so many sick people won’t come for treatment if it means bankrupting themselves.... Ma’am.”

Ramira’s smile froze on her lips. “You don’t have to call me ma’am.”

Rebecca chose that moment to swoop in and save Emily. This kind of thing didn’t happen over an open chest in the surgical suite.

“Ramira! I didn’t know you were attending. I’d have brought you that bottle of tequila I owe you. Although I hear this place is cracking down on the daytime booze.”

The two women greeted each other with easy air-kisses, clasping each other’s forearms for just a moment. This polished and professional Rebecca took a little getting used to, given that for the past few years Emily had known her first and foremost as her sister’s partner. It had been a reason not to accept the job in Washington, if she was honest, but Emily had heard no rumors about nepotism in the hallways so far. Besides, it meant seeing her sister beyond occasional weekends and holidays, something Emily would never take for granted.

Emily wished she could summon that sort of casual poise. She hated feeling so awkward in her body, even more so around these natural glamazons who all seemed to be old friends. Standing to the side of them, Emily felt like a bridesmaid Who’d only been added to the bridal party at

the last minute. She comforted herself with the knowledge that most of them would have no idea how to treat an aortic aneurysm.

“You also owe me twenty on the Republican primaries. I hear we’ve got a new runner today.”

“No. No way!” Rebecca’s face scrunched in something akin to disgust. “I might not be a fan of the GOP, but even they wouldn’t sink that low.”

“How low?” Emily couldn’t help but ask.

“Apparently, Gabriel Emerson is announcing a run,” Rebecca said. “Ramira here told me he had an eye on the primaries, but I thought she was full of—anyway, that candidacy won’t last long. They’ll pick a heavyweight candidate like Senator Randolph, and it’ll be business as usual.”

“Wait, you mean Gabe the super religious guy from TV?” Try as she might, Emily couldn’t call another one to mind. “Talks like a pastor, but somehow thinks free healthcare is against God’s teachings. That guy?”

“That’s right. Calls himself Good Ol’ Gabe or something like that,” Rebecca said. “And he’s never so much as run for dogcatcher. The Republicans will wipe the floor with him before Iowa. He’s just a ratings stunt.”

“Be careful what you wish for,” Ramira said, but Emily felt her attention being pulled. She could have sworn there was a shift in the air.

Other people seemed to be sensing it, too. The chatter in the room diminished to a low hum, and Emily caught fellow guests glancing around, looking for some disturbance.

Then, without anything that Emily could put her finger on, the collective attention turned to the closed double doors in the front corner of the room, just beyond the staging area for the panels. An Asian-American woman in a suit stepped up where Emily had given her talk, introducing herself as Asha Kohli, deputy chief of staff. She clapped her hands, and the room fell silent. “And now, everyone, please welcome the president of the United States.”

The doors opened without a sound, and the president came striding in, hands half-raised in that familiar campaign-trail greeting. Not quite a wave, not quite pointing, and suggesting something of a victory lap at the same time.

Emily had met plenty of impressive people in her time, and knew she was considered one in her own right. Governors, mayors, movie stars, and

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even the odd international pop-star goddess, through charity work. She was familiar with presence and how hype could build a person up to be more than they actually were, and rarely fell for the illusion.

President Constance Calvin, however, was something else. She glowed, as though movie lighting was trained on her as she moved. Her steps were assured, her handshakes brisk and accompanied by searing eye contact with each person. As she made her way through the throng with shocking efficiency, Emily realized she was right in line for her own meet and greet. No amount of realization could have prepared her for meeting the most powerful woman in the world. Emily thought her arms had maybe gone numb.

When she had been about ten years old, Emily had been worried about asteroids and how they always seemed to be on a collision course with Earth. Then she had done her research, guided by her father, and finally stopped fretting over it. In that moment, though, that old, panicked feeling came roaring back. She was in the president's trajectory, and there was no way out.

\* \* \*

Coming straight from a meeting that had run late, Connie had little time to prepare a strategy for the meeting with the health industry. Before she had entirely moved on in her head, the agents swung open the double doors, and she flipped that internal switch to be on for the room.

Thankfully, she had a lifetime's experience of playing it cool, and it would just be the usual glad-handing with the additional bonus of scoping out this Emily woman who'd spent time with Zach. Emily. No, that was too familiar. Dr. Lawrence.

Hands were offered to shake, and Connie did her best small talk without ever pausing with any one person. When she finally got a lock on Dr. Lawrence's position, recognizing her from photos in the medical journals articles she had looked up, Connie was a little impressed to see that she had clustered with Ramira and another tall Black woman. The infamous Rebecca Mason, CEO of Washington's premier hospital.

"And I believe you must be the delegation from Blackwell Memorial Hospital," Connie said as she approached, conscious that most of the room

was still watching her. The very picture of diplomacy, she extended her hand to shake.

“Rebecca Mason, Madam President. It’s a pleasure to see you again. During the campaign in Atlanta I was—”

“A great help, yes. We so appreciated that.” Connie remembered her and when their paths had crossed, but not why—she was used to fudging those details.

Ramira was watching on with something approaching a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. She would never be so unprofessional as to be caught actually smirking, but clearly, the potential here had tickled Ramira all the same. She was going to pay for that come the next staff poker game on Air Force One.

“Madam President.” Emily jumped right in. “I’m Dr. Emily Lawrence—”

“Yes, I am aware you had a consult with my son. I think the FBI has you on a watch list for character assassination now. Better than actual assassination, I suppose.”

“The—FBI?” Although Dr. Lawrence sported a light golden tan, there was no mistaking the way she visibly paled. Not one of the world’s great rule breakers, then. “Am I—? Did you—?”

“Relax, Dr. Lawrence. I am not in the habit of calling the feds on anyone who can make my son not hate a hospital appointment. Although my mother-in-law expressed some concerns.”

Something in those words seemed to have a galvanizing effect. The bright woman straightened her spine and squared her shoulders. It served to show off the toned upper arms that she had folded over her pale blue sleeveless dress, an oasis of color in a room filled with the regulation gray, black, and navy that passed for a sort of uniform in D.C. The tight hairstyle from photographs was gone, her brown hair partly pinned back but falling in soft waves over Dr. Lawrence’s shoulders. The tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses gave her a scholarly air, and it was clear this was a woman to be taken seriously.

“Madam President,” Emily said, and damn, was Connie tired of always being addressed by her title. It had the unfortunate effect of making people think they were addressing the position and not the person. Usually. “I assessed your son as a doctor, not as a political rival or someone with an

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agenda. I was just making conversation with Zach about his condition, and he's such a bright young man—"

"Emily," Rebecca said, everything in those two syllables an audible warning, but Dr. Lawrence steamrolled on.

"But you can't deny that both your political opponents and allies have a point when they demand better of the administration on healthcare. What else could you possibly be doing that would save more lives or be more important for humanity? You said it was your first priority during the campaign."

"Well, that is a big question, Dr. Lawrence, but we are currently trying to reduce the deficit; roll back decades of climate change before the planet goes up in flames; and, just for the hell of it, we thought we might try and do something effective about the epidemic of assault weapons on our streets. Maybe we would have time to spend on healthcare if our hospitals weren't overrun with gunshot victims, don't you think?"

The thrill of a good debate had Connie a little giddy. Her shoes that were pinching before didn't seem to hurt anymore, and the faint throb of a headache at the base of her skull had faded. This was where she lived, where she did her best work.

At first, she saw the same light in Dr. Lawrence's eyes at the prospect of verbally throwing down. But somewhere in the middle of Connie's impromptu speech, though, that stunning face had seemed to turn to marble.

"Thank you, yes. I'm aware of the gun problem we have in America." No more warmth, no more smiling nervously around the words. It seemed as though Dr. Lawrence could barely push them out of her throat at all, her voice had gotten so tight.

"Apologies, did I—?"

"If you'll excuse me." Dr. Lawrence backed away from their little group, the whole room watching them by that point. She stumbled for a second in her heels before picking up pace and striding right out of the East Room.

Conversation around them tapered out completely. The sound of the doors opening and closing seemed to echo through the space despite there being at least a hundred people present. A pointed glare from Ramira set Asha into motion, starting a too-loud discussion about the recent tsunami in the Pacific. The noise of the room soon bubbled back up.

“I do not think anyone has walked out on me since I suggested karaoke night at the G8,” Connie said, still watching the doors Dr. Lawrence had exited through. “Was it something I said?”

Ramira and Rebecca exchanged a glance that anyone else might have missed, but Connie was used to that silent telegraph passing between her staff members. It wasn’t comforting to know that it worked just as well with an outsider.

“Ramira, should I take this, or—?”

“No, you go enjoy the rest of the event, and check on Dr. Lawrence. The president and I have a meeting over in the Roosevelt Room now.”

“We do?” Connie blurted out. “But—”

Ramira gestured to the nearest Secret Service agents, and they fell back into formation, whisking Connie and Ramira back out into the hallway.

“Back to my office, I think,” Ramira said.

“But what was—?”

“Maybe best discussed in private, ma’am,” Ramira said, her voice firm and inviting no arguments.

“You really do not have to ma’am me, Ramira. Did you ever imagine when we were in our dorm room back at Yale almost thirty years ago that you’d be tacking on my title whenever we spoke to each other?”

“Yes, I did, Madam President. I believe that’s how I got you elected in the first place.”

Connie rolled her eyes, just a little. There were days when Ramira’s self-assuredness was all that got them through, but it was a little revisionist history to say this had been the master plan all along.

“Well, I got to be DA back in Los Angeles and attorney general of California all by myself. You did not show up until you wanted me to run for governor, so perhaps this is not all down to you. I might have ended up here regardless.”

The staff ebbed and flowed around them until they reached the door of Ramira’s office. Once inside, they were left alone, agents posted outside each of the room’s three closed doors, including the one connected to the Oval Office. So often, Connie did not notice quite which agent ended up where, apart from the one nearest to her. Their silent ballet of observation and protection flowed around her day and night without her ever having to make a comment or change a detail.

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“Now, what in the hell was all that about?” Connie did not sit, which infuriatingly meant Ramira would not either, opting instead to lean against the front of her desk and cross her arms in the way she used to when delivering lectures in her professorial days.

“The other day, when we discussed Emily Lawrence, I thought the name was familiar. But it was her mother I was thinking of. Alicia. She was on the bench in California.”

“Oh, right, Alicia Lawrence. I know that name, too. Not sure I ever did argue in front of her as a judge, but was she not up for the Supreme Court at one point?”

Ramira scrunched her face a little, pursing her lips the way she did when choosing her words carefully. Was the Lawrence family attached to some old political scandal?

“You might have missed a lot of it. It was around when you first got married and you were traveling more. But she’s the nominee who got shot the week before her confirmation hearings? They killed her husband, too. He worked for the FBI.”

At times, it was a blessing to have a good memory, because as soon as Ramira filled in the details, the news story came back to Connie all in a rush. It had been terrifying at the time, a real threat to the pro-choice cause and any hope of keeping the court balanced, never mind liberal leaning. Alicia Lawrence had been a lightning-rod candidate, feted by the left and loathed by the right. The assassination—there was no better word for it, since it was politically motivated—had dominated the news cycle for weeks as the suspect eluded capture at first. The case had never fully been on her radar, solved before she was back at work.

“That is awful. And there I was joking about assassinations and bragging about our record on guns? A record we have not even come through on yet, either. Jesus, Ramira. We need a better signal for when you need me to shut my mouth.”

“Due respect, ma’am, you were off and running. Your oratory style doesn’t leave many pauses to jump in and derail you.”

“Still, she looked really rattled. As soon as I realized—Wait, was she there for the shooting? I remember something in the coverage about how both children were there, but only one testified as a witness.”

“I looked up the particulars after we talked on Monday,” Ramira said, because of course she did. “Both daughters were present—the family had



been out to lunch before the hearings started, they'd been looking at houses in D.C. The older sister, Sutton, she had some minor injuries, and Emily's going to help her kept the girls out of the shooter's sightline. By the time she got back to her parents, they were already on the ground. She was the only one who saw the shooter's face."

"And she testified? She stood up in court and faced him down?"

Ramira nodded. "Once they finally caught him, yes."

Connie knew from experience how hard it was to get a reliable firsthand witness on the stand, especially when the loss was so close. Every new detail she unearthed about Emily Lawrence only made her more interesting, but far more than the curiosity, Connie felt a pang of sympathy for what the woman had been through. Her own losses still weighed heavily on her, but it was unimaginable to think of the trauma Dr. Lawrence must have endured. It made Connie's glib lecture about the trouble of gun violence leave a bad taste in her mouth.

"If that was back around when I got married, how old was she?"

"Twenty years ago. She's around thirty-seven now, according to her file. Ma'am, if this is of interest, I can have a briefing memo prepared. But I don't think we need to spend a lot of time on it."

Connie paced back and forth on the plush carpet that lined the office, the deep navy wool rubbing against her patent black heels.

"It certainly does not feel right, just leaving it there. I wanted to build bridges with our base, but instead I just managed to bring up some traumatic memories."

"I'm sure she'll be fine." Ramira unfolded her arms, running a hand through her hair. "But you know, it's a little sweet how you're worried about it. Sometimes I forget you might be the last genuinely nice person in Washington, boss."

"Well, let's not let that rumor get around. All the same, I would like to send some flowers or something to Dr. Lawrence, now that I know I really stepped in it."

Ramira held up her hands. "I know by now there's no stopping you when you get an idea in your head. Just try and keep it on budget, ma'am? We don't need the press comparing you to Elton John again."

Connie rolled her eyes. "It's a bouquet, Ramira. How much trouble can it be?"

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# PRESIDENTIAL

BY LOLA KEELEY

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