

JANUARY 2022

Sunday, January 2nd

The silence was deafening, broken only by the inordinately loud ticking of the wall-mounted clock.

Dr. Rothschild turned to the President, his mouth set in a grim line. "I'm afraid...well, there's nothing more I can do, Madam President." He exhaled wearily. "I'm sorry."

Devlyn Marlowe crossed sweater-clad arms over her chest and lifted a single dark eyebrow at the sheepish, but still defiant, patient. "Are you happy now?"

A blonde head shook.

Dev's gaze softened. "Honey, it won't hurt." Her lips twitched a little, but with effort, she held her smile at bay. "Be my big girl and let the doctor do his job."

"Nuh huh."

Dev sighed. This was not the way she wanted to spend her Sunday morning, but desperate times called for desperate measures. "He's the best in the business!"

"No." Said between clenched teeth, which was hard to do considering how woozy the patient was. "No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No. No."

"When you're finished you can have..." the doctor cast a desperate glance at his nurse, who was straightening the tray of instruments that hadn't been touched yet.

She blinked a few times, realizing that he was actually addressing her. "Umm...a balloon?"

There were three children in the room, but none of their eyes lit up like Aaron Marlowe's.

"Not for you," his brother said, jabbing an elbow into Aaron's mid-section.

As any self-respecting five-year-old would do, Aaron kicked Christopher's foot in retaliation.

"Ouch!"

"Boys." The warning in Dev's voice was clear.

Ashley Marlowe, the oldest of the children, stepped forward and put a small hand on Lauren's arm. "It's only a filling." She didn't have any of those. She didn't even know anyone who did. But her mother had assured her it was common in the "olden days" and no big deal. "You can be brave. I know it."

Lauren Strayer, the President's biographer and fiancée, smiled warmly at the dark-haired girl who so closely resembled her mother. Of course, the action caused a long string of drool to drip from the corner of her mouth. She couldn't feel lips, gums, or most of her tongue, but that didn't matter. Jesus Christ himself could step down from the mount, but if he held a dental drill in one hand Lauren was going to run in the opposite direction. That's just the way it was. And no fancy dentist, with his high-tech laser equipment, was going to change that. Inwardly, she cursed her own fear, knowing that it had been more than a year since her last appointment and that she had probably made things worse for herself.

"Eww!" Christopher and Aaron chorused when they caught sight of the drool. Then they laughed and pointed.

Lauren shot Devlyn a look of pure ice for bringing the children along to her appointment.

Devlyn shrugged one shoulder, correctly interpreting the die-die-die look Lauren was giving her. "Sorry, I had to play dirty." Of course, she wasn't sorry at all, but it sounded good. This was

for Lauren's own good, no matter how much her lover fought it. "I love you too much to let you become a toothless old hag." A beat. "Before your time."

"Why you—" Lauren began to sit up, intent on killing Devlyn then and there, and thus delaying the replacement of an old filling for twenty to life, but Ashley blocked her way. The sudden movement caused Lauren's small, wire-rimmed glasses to end up hanging crookedly from her face.

The nurse deftly plucked them off and set them on the tray alongside the instruments so they wouldn't get broken, giving Lauren a reproachful look for being so much trouble.

Chuckling at Lauren, Devlyn jumped back a step, just in case she got a second wind.

Lauren closed her eyes in the hope that the room would stop spinning. She was allergic to the super-strength topical numbing agent applied for most dental work. That left her two choices: an old-fashioned shot of Novocain or gas. She'd passed out cold the last time someone came close to her with a needle, so gas it was. "If I wasn't so stoned, you'd be in deep trouble," she murmured.

"Fine. Fine." Devlyn lifted her hands in resignation. "I'm giving up."

The dentist, his nurse, Lauren, and the Secret Service agent standing unobtrusively in front of the window all gaped at Dev and said in unison, "You are?"

Dev nodded. *Sorry, sweetheart.* "I sure am. Go to it, kids."

Like von Trapp family clones, the children lined up by age and size and stood before Lauren, who broke into a rousing, drooling chorus of "Edelweiss" before they could even say a word.

Dev covered her mouth with her hand, but her shoulders still shook with silent laughter.

Realizing that nobody was singing but her and that the gas she'd been gulping down only moments before like there was no tomorrow was just a *teensy* bit more potent than the last stuff they'd had to special order for her back home in Tennessee, Lauren quieted. Fair brows drew together. "Party poopers."

Ashley, the children's spokesperson, looked at her future stepmother with serious brown eyes. "If you won't stop fighting the dentist and let him do his job, then how can you expect us to?"

Aaron and Christopher nodded their agreement.

Lauren gasped and pointed a shaking finger at Devlyn. "That's...why, that's *horrible!* You trained them to say that," she accused, more drool leaking onto the blue paper bib around her neck.

"Did it work?" Dev asked.

Lauren looked back at the three little conspiring monsters before her, whom she loved with all her heart. *Crap.* She sighed and grumbled, "Yes, it worked."

The children cheered.

"But I need more gas." Lauren turned pleading eyes on Devlyn and the tall woman's demeanor changed instantly, all traces of teasing vanishing before her next heartbeat. Lauren wasn't joking; she was truly afraid.

Dev took a step closer to Dr. Rothschild and pinned him with a serious stare. "Can she have more and still be okay?"

"Define okay."

"Alive."

"She can have more."

This time it was Lauren who cheered, scaring the nurse so badly that she backed into the tray of instruments and sent them clattering to the floor. The woman mumbled something to Lauren, who mumbled something back, only twice as loudly.

Christopher looked at his mother in confusion. "Mom, what's a Nazi?" Dev shook her head. It was going to be a long morning.

Lauren, in a pair of worn jeans and a sweatshirt, sat in front of her computer. She stared intently at the wide, crystal clear screen. Finally, she sighed. "File close." She tapped her finger on the desk as she thought. "Open file name: Marlowe twenty ten to twenty fifteen."

The sound was turned off, so silently and dutifully, the small machine obeyed her voice commands.

Lauren found her place at the bottom of a plain text document and began to type, her fingers moving in a steady blur. But after only a few moments, her fingers paused over the keyboard. She frowned and took off her glasses to rub tired gray eyes. "Close file. Open story notes file: Marlowe." The screen before her flashed and changed. "Deactivate keyboard."

Gremlin, her chubby pug, recognized the command as his opportunity for some attention, since his own canine partner, Princess, was sleeping at the other end of the bed and paying him no mind whatsoever. He jumped down from his spot squarely in the center of Lauren's tall bed and lazily walked to his mistress.

Lauren looked down at the animal with a small smile. She could see the gears in Gremlin's head turning.

He looked up at her lap and the jump he'd have to make and then promptly dropped down on top of Lauren's feet. "Slug," she said affectionately, reaching down to scratch Gremlin's short, coarse fur. "Let's see if I can remember how to use this fancy new machine Devlyn bought me for Christmas." She'd been resisting it over the past few weeks, but knew if she put it off much longer it would hurt Dev's feelings.

Gremlin let out a low growl at the mention of the President's name.

Lauren snorted. "That's what I love about you, Gremlin, consistency." She reached for a thick manual on her desk and quickly found the voice command she wanted. "Activate dictation."

"Ready when you are," appeared at the top of her screen for several seconds, then disappeared.

Lauren nodded a little, obnoxiously pleased with herself for getting this far. She tossed the manual back on her desk and steepled her fingers. Then she began to speak, pouring her thoughts out into space and into her computer's memory.

"The hardest part of this story is not telling who Devlyn is. I know who she is. Or at least I know her better than anyone else on earth doing this job would. I've given up hope of really capturing her in a single book. But she's easy to know and easier to love, and what I'll be able to share will be enough for the outside world. But I can't approach this story the way I have my other biographies. I'm not disinterested. I'm way over-the-top-in-love interested.

"I've already deleted five times as much text as I've kept, especially when it comes to the 'Marlowe For President: A Voice for the People' campaign. I feel like my being out of the country for most of her campaign is really hurting my ability to chronicle that part of her story. Sure, I can read the papers, interview people, and talk to Devlyn herself, but I didn't 'live' those last few years with the rest of America. I didn't 'feel' it like the rest of America did. Up to that point, and after that point, I'm fine. I think. Though putting her term or, God help me, two terms in office into some sort of historical perspective is going to be a challenge. Too many people are still walking around with their mouths hanging open, not believing that it happened at all, much less understanding how or why.

“The first female president. That makes Devlyn the most powerful, and probably most famous, woman in American history. Sorry, Jackie and Marilyn. And I haven’t even touched on her being the first open lesbian to take a stand squarely in the center of the world political stage. Sure, there’ve been a lot of actresses and singers who did, but never a woman politician at anywhere near her level of success. Though I think of Canadian Prime Minister Martin Allaire coming out of the closet after his male lover died...what, eight or nine years ago? It wasn’t quite the same because he was already in office when he made the announcement, but it still paved the way.”

Lauren sighed deeply.

“It makes me sick to think about what happened to him and, God knows, I don’t need another reason to worry for Devlyn. I’ve got enough already. We’ve come so far in just a single generation, but there is still so much hate. It wasn’t even a Canadian who stabbed Allaire, but an American. Anyway.

“Certainly the social and economic revolution spurred by the recession of two thousand eight set the stage for the Emancipation Party’s rise to power. But how does a party that nobody had ever heard of twenty years ago elect a president? How did the Republican and Democratic Parties lose so much that they allowed this to happen? Isn’t that beyond the scope of this book? Do I care? I’ve never had to write so much back history before. Will readers buy it simply because it actually happened or will they require more? I’m not—”

A gentle knock on the door interrupted Lauren. She looked at the screen and nervously licked her lips, unsure of how to preserve her work. “Save file,” she said, and “Saved”, flashed at the top of the screen before disappearing. She silently uttered a little prayer of thanks. “Close file. Activate screensaver.”

“Coming,” she called, hearing another knock at her door. She extracted her socked feet from beneath Gremlin’s warm belly, missing his warmth instantly as she jogged across the floor. Lauren opened the door to find a Secret Service agent standing there with a thick envelope in his hand.

“Ms. Strayer,” he greeted her cordially.

Lauren smiled at him. His short, nearly military haircut, clean-shaven face, and dark suit would have given away his job had the writer not known exactly who he was. “Hello, Jeff.”

“I have something for you that came special delivery; and something from the President as well.”

Lauren took the large envelope, a little startled by its weight. The label read “Starlight Publishing”. Her brow creased. She wasn’t expecting a manuscript back.

“And these are from the President.” The young man couldn’t suppress his grin when he reached into his blazer pocket and pulled out two Hershey Bars.

Lauren laughed, but happily took the chocolate. “And was there a message with this important presidential delivery?”

“There was.” Jeff blushed a little.

Lauren’s eyebrows jumped. “Well?”

“Umm...she umm... She said to tell you she was sorry for playing dirty.” He peered down uncertainly at Lauren. “And that you’d know what she meant.”

Lauren’s eyes narrowed as she remembered. “I most certainly do know what she meant. I was supposed to have an appointment to get my hair trimmed and somehow the driver, who I didn’t want in the first place I might add, ended up taking me to the dentist! And then—”

“Ma’am?”

“Uh, yes.”

“That’s more information than I really needed.”

Lauren’s mouth clicked shut. She winced. “Oh. Sorry, Jeff.” She squeezed his arm and her gaze softened. “I know I keep telling you and you keep ignoring me, but you can call me Lauren, you know. I’ve known you for nearly a year already.”

“I know, Ms. Strayer. Thank you.”

Lauren rolled her eyes. Why did she bother? “Thanks for the goodies.”

Jeff bit his lower lip in a gesture that Lauren found oddly adolescent for a man with a fully loaded Glock Forty strapped to his side. “I’m supposed to report back to the President and tell her if she and the children are forgiven.”

Lauren sucked in a surprised breath. “What is she talking about? The children never needed to be forgiven. Could you ask them if they’d like to come over to my room and...I dunno, do kid things?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He rocked back on his heels and decided to be bold. “And the President? Can she come over and play?”

Lauren laughed, thinking that his choice of words was perfect. “Of course, Jeff.”

He looked relieved.

Lauren lifted her chin a little. “As soon as she comes and apologizes on her own.”

A wide grin split his face.

Lauren blinked for a few seconds, surprised by his reaction, until realization dawned. “What time did you pick?”

“Pick? I’m not sure I understand, Ms. Strayer,” he lied, glancing down at his wristwatch uncertainly.

“Uh huh.” Lauren pursed her lips. “In the pool,” she prodded, gesturing with one hand. “What time are Devlyn and I supposed to make up today and how much will you win if you’re right?”

Jeff’s face turned bright red. “Umm...”

“Don’t bullshit me, Jeff. I’ve had a recent dental experience. After the way Devlyn tricked me, killing you would be anticlimactic.”

“I have three-thirty and I’ll win seventy-five dollars,” he admitted sheepishly.

“Cheapsters,” Lauren snorted. She’d made two-hundred-and-forty dollars the week before when she correctly selected the exact moment during Devlyn’s meeting with the Secretary of Defense when that little vein in the President’s forehead would pop out, signaling doom for whomever the tall woman was talking to.

Lauren checked her watch, then looked back up at Jeff. She wasn’t exactly mad at Dev, she decided, more like supremely annoyed. It was two forty-five. “Give the children their message now, please. And you can tell Devlyn to stop by in about,” she grinned and slapped Jeff on the back, “oh, forty-five minutes or so. Dinner’s on me.”

Thursday, January 13th

Dev tossed for the thousandth time; sleep, apparently, was not on her agenda for tonight. She rolled over to face Lauren’s side of the bed. It was cold and empty. A little sheepishly, she grabbed the pillow Lauren normally used and tried to connect with her absent partner. But her linens had been freshly changed and all she could detect was the faint scent of the fabric softener, which smelled good certainly, but not like her longed-for companion.

She sat up and then swung her feet over the edge of the bed, pushing them into her slippers as she reached for her robe. Sighing, she padded to the window and gazed out at the moon that hung low and full in the sky. "You're pitiful, Marlowe." She closed her eyes and let her forehead rest gently against the cold glass, feeling foolish and lonely. "She's only been gone for ten days." And that meant four more until she'd be home.

Devlyn opened tired eyes and looked out at the gently falling snow. A thick blanket covered the ground, looking clean and pristine, and she smiled, thinking that her kids and Lauren would love to go out and make a snowman.

Dev wondered if she would go insane before the writer returned home from her business trip. She knew that Lauren couldn't spend all her time in Washington. The younger woman needed to conduct interviews in Ohio and several other states before flying to New York to deal with her publisher. Still, Dev had hated to see her go and had felt a little unsettled since she'd been gone.

To need someone this much was as discomfiting as it was wonderful. Even when she and Samantha were married, the irresistible first Mrs. Marlowe could go on a trip, which she frequently did, and Dev had always managed just fine. *Maybe it's just because I'm older now. I get all sentimental.* But somehow, Devlyn knew that wasn't the whole truth.

With Samantha, so much of Dev's focus was on herself, her career, what she wanted, how she felt, and the bright future that Sam and the children would share in. On many levels, Dev realized that she'd been rather selfish with Samantha; Lauren didn't let her get away with any of that. This time they each had their own ambitions and expectations, and somehow Dev found herself much more comfortable with that. Despite her role as the most powerful person on the planet, she didn't feel that she eclipsed Lauren. She had met her match and it was a relief.

That didn't mean, however, that she liked being separated.

"Shit," Dev mumbled, pushing off from the window and returning to the bed. She yanked up her pillow and left her room, wandering down the hall to Lauren's room in her pajamas. The Secret Service agents at each end of the hall pretended not to notice as a disheveled Dev quietly walked past the portraits of previous presidents and an antique settee.

Trying the knob on Lauren's apartment, she found it unlocked. No matter how much she'd prodded, Lauren had insisted on keeping her own separate quarters. It had been controversial when Lauren moved into the White House to observe the President for her work on Dev's biography. Now, however, the press was having a field day over the two women living in the same house, a house owned by the taxpayers, while being engaged. Lauren had insisted on not adding fuel to the fire by officially moving into the Presidential living quarters, though Devlyn suspected that Lauren's motives for wanting her own space were far simpler than that. Life with a boisterous family, for someone who was generally a quiet, independent person, was still a lot to take. Even after a year at the White House, Lauren needed her privacy.

Devlyn stepped inside the large room. It was mostly dark, and it took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the bluish light streaming through the window. She took a deep, comforting breath. The room held traces of Lauren's perfume. Her gaze flicked under the bed. She waited to hear a familiar growl before she remembered that Gremlin and his lady love, Princess, a prize-winning Pomeranian that Devlyn inherited from her mother when the show dog was knocked up by the randy Gremlin, were sleeping with the children while Lauren was away.

Dev ambled across the floor and pushed off her slippers as she crawled into bed, snuggling up to Lauren's pillow and tossing her own to the side. "Yup. Pitiful," she murmured, letting the familiar scents wash over her. "Ahhh...much better." She closed her eyes to give her exhausted brain some much-needed rest.

It was bad enough that Lauren was out of town and Dev felt like a spoiled child denied her favorite toy, but the State of the Union address was only a few days away, and the President was, as her father would say, “As nervous as a long-tailed cat in a room full of rocking chairs.” Because there was no way to deliver a realistic address only a few weeks after taking office, she had dispensed with the State of the Union address in her inaugural year, as many presidents before her had done.

But this year the address not only was expected, it had been in the planning stages since late November. In just a few days, she would take that walk into the Capitol, where both Houses of Congress and the nation would wait to hear what she had to say. She almost wished that President Wilson hadn’t revived the practice of the president actually delivering the speech and that she could use Thomas Jefferson’s method of having clerks read it to both Houses independently. Then she wished she had back the time that she had wasted learning tidbits of information that were better suited for Trivial Pursuit than real life. A wry smile curled her lips. *At least I usually win.*

It wasn’t as if she hadn’t done this sort of thing before. Every year, she had delivered the State of the State address to the citizens of Ohio. But as Governor, she wasn’t standing before the entire world when she spoke. And she’d never, ever, had a year like she’d just had.

There had been a bombing of civilian targets by a violent anti-government militia. Dev’s move to quash the group had been bold and decisive, but not without loss of life. In her mind at least, it had not been one of her shining moments.

There had been an assassination attempt that had very nearly claimed her life and was still the source of sporadic nightmares and physical pain. If it weren’t for the support of her closest friend and political ally, Chief of Staff David McMillian, and Lauren, Dev wasn’t sure she would have made it through the months of rehabilitation, both mental and physical.

Then there was the on-again-off-again turmoil that surrounded Lauren’s presence in her life. Her own party had nearly deserted her when what started as a business relationship with Lauren had deepened and turned decidedly romantic. Lauren, however, wasn’t ready to quit as Dev’s biographer and Starlight Publishing had saved the day by buying out the party’s contract for Lauren’s services.

Now, she was trying to juggle a new relationship and three children, while running a nation. *God, no wonder I’m tired.*

Dev’s first year in office had been a roller coaster, and there were days when she felt like she was going to be thrown from her seat. President Truman had said, “Being president is like riding a tiger”, and Dev couldn’t agree more. She made sure to count her fingers every night to see that none had been bitten off.

It was no wonder the dream started the way it did.

Dev was in her office poring over the speech she was about to give. David was pacing nervously around her office, while various aides made sure she knew exactly which points needed to be stressed and which should be glossed over.

“Would you sit down?” Dev growled in David’s direction. “You’re making me a nervous wreck.”

The tall, red-haired man grumbled and took a seat. He began chewing at his thick mustache in a way that Devlyn usually found endearing. At the moment, however, it was just plain annoying. When Dev looked closer, she realized he was also wearing a feather boa and a ridiculous hat. “I don’t care if they are in style, David. Get rid of it; you look hideous.”

The scene shifted; suddenly she was standing in the Capitol, outside the massive doors, waiting for the Sergeant at Arms to make the formal announcement of her arrival. Dev twitched at her skirt, wishing she'd selected a pair of trousers instead. As she stared at the doors, a small panel slid open and a very mischievous set of green eyes stared at her before asking, "Are you a good witch or a bad witch?"

"What?" Dev felt the panic rising in her chest.

The voice was impatient. "Are you a good witch or a bad witch?"

"Umm..." Dev stood dumbstruck, trying to figure out how to answer this question. "Depends on what day it is and if I'm PMSing," she finally said, taking a step forward. She was late; she didn't have time for this nonsense. "Now, let me in."

"Bad witch," the voice squeaked as the panel slammed shut and the eyes disappeared.

Dev looked around the hallway where she was waiting; it was empty, except for small wind-up monkeys, which skittered around the polished marble floor as they played their cymbals and drums. She tried to shake the vision, but they only got bigger as they came at her. Just as she felt she was about to be attacked by the mechanical monsters, the doors flew open and she stumbled into a room full of laughing people. People laughing at her.

"Aw, shit," she muttered as she fought to maintain her balance. "This is my worst nightmare."

Somewhere in the back of her mind she realized that indeed this was a nightmare, and she watched with fascination as face after face in her dream shifted and changed, morphing into an entirely new person each time. They were all there; everyone who had ever meant anything to her: her parents, her children, Lauren, her staff, everyone. Very soon they all became a blur and the room felt like it was spinning out of control. Colors flashed as the spinning got worse and voices blurred into a single white noise that nearly drove Dev to her knees.

Suddenly, the spinning stopped and there was but a single, hauntingly familiar voice. "Dev?"

The tall woman spun around to find Samantha standing a few feet away wearing a beautiful, flowing gown made of white silk. She was an angel, and the sight of her brought tears to Dev's eyes.

Her throat felt dry and her tongue heavy. "Samantha?" She took a hesitant step forward.

"Why, Dev?" Samantha's eyes held the bewilderment of a child, but her warm voice was all woman.

"Why what?" Dev tried to step closer to the radiant vision of her deceased wife, but her feet felt as though they were encased in cement.

"Why are you leaving me?"

A sudden stabbing pain in Dev's chest made it hard to breathe. "I'm not leaving you. I love you."

"Then why are you marrying her?" Samantha pointed and Dev looked over her own shoulder to find Lauren standing behind her.

Lauren was wearing a pair of faded jeans, no shoes or socks, and a soft white cotton shirt. Her wavy, shoulder-length hair was slightly mussed from running her fingers through it, and she had a pencil tucked above her ear the way she did when she was working. She smiled gently at Dev, the action creasing the skin around her eyes and making Dev's heart feel as though it might burst.

"Dev?" Samantha's smooth voice prodded.

"I-I-I..." Dev sputtered and shook her head, trying to clear it. She didn't know what to say. She told herself this was just a dream, then watched with a slightly open mouth as Samantha floated over to Lauren and hovered next to her. The two loves of her life stood very close to each other, but not touching. Dev looked for it, but couldn't see any animosity between them.

"It's all right, Devlyn," Lauren drawled gently. Her eyes shone with understanding and love. "No matter what, you can tell us the truth."

Dev nodded and shifted her attention to Samantha. "No matter how much I love you...loved you...you're gone, Sam." Her smile was bittersweet. "I'm marrying Lauren because I need to get on with my life and because I love her. She's my future."

The words were still hanging in the air when Lauren vanished into thin air and Samantha began to morph into Louis Henry, the teenage boy who had tried to assassinate her. Dev watched in horror as he raised his gun and pointed it at her head. Her heart leapt into her throat. She tried to move, but her feet were still rooted firmly to the ground. The sounds of gunshots exploded in her head, so loudly they hurt. Her hands flew to her ears, and then the scene changed again.

Dev was now standing before the joint session of Congress. The expectant, somewhat impatient look on everyone's face made it clear she had been saying something, but for the life of her she couldn't remember what. She glanced around the huge gallery and felt a cold sweat across her upper lip. Her pulse began to thump wildly in her ears as the moment stretched on endlessly. Finally, in a near panic, she shouted, "I quit!"

Dev shot up in bed. She was twisted in the sweaty covers and breathing hard. She knew instantly that she'd been dreaming. "Jesus Christ on a crutch." After a moment of carefully sorting through the mental jumble, she was able to sigh in relief and even smile a little ruefully. "I'm cracking up."

*She started to settle back into Lauren's bed when she realized she wasn't alone. Glancing behind her, she discovered that Aaron had found his way there too. She smiled and lay back next to her son, who curled up against his mother without ever waking. *Guess I'm not the only one missing Lauren.**

It was close to four in the morning when Lauren opened the door to her room, carrying her computer case and a small travel bag. Closing the door behind her, she was just about to flip on the light when she saw several lumps in her bed. She nearly screamed, but one lump in particular looked familiar. Setting down her luggage, she carefully crossed the room.

Devlyn, Christopher, and Aaron were practically lying in a pile on her bed, with Dev on the bottom. Ashley was resting crossways along the headboard with one leg on Christopher's head and her arm on Aaron's head. The eight-year-old was in her pink footie-pajamas and snoring nearly as loudly as Devlyn.

The Marlowes' sleeping arrangements reminded Lauren of the puglies, Gremlin's half-pugs, all of them such ugly puppies that Dev had cleverly given them away as "gifts" to her ex-friends and staff. But instead of a pile of canines, it was a pile of people, their limbs braided together and contorted bodies twisted around each other. Lauren questioned briefly how Chris could breathe with his sister's leg draped over his face.

A smile worked its way across her face as she took in the scene. She marveled for the millionth time how she had lucked across an entire family who loved her. A little guiltily, she realized that it had been two days since she'd called Devlyn, but far longer since she'd talked to any of the kids. Before the Marlowe children, she'd never given parenthood a second thought.

Then, without her knowing quite how, they'd wormed their way into her heart to stay. Only she wasn't as good at showing that yet as she wanted to be. She would work to change that, she promised herself. They deserved that. No more trips this long, not alone at least. My publisher and everyone else can just go to hell.

Lauren stripped off her coat and clothes, slipping into a pair of thick sweat pants and a well-worn University of Tennessee T-shirt. She yawned and looked longingly at her bed. It was king-sized, but everyone was lying at such odd angles she didn't see a spot where she could fit in. Suddenly, she caught a glint of light as it reflected off Dev's eyes. Damn, she's beautiful, Lauren's mind whispered, everything else forgotten for a moment.

"You're home early." Dev's voice was rough with sleep.

Lauren walked around to where her lover was lying and pushed back a shock of dark hair to kiss her on the forehead, then she moved down and brushed her lips against Devlyn's, humming into the sweet but brief contact. "I was missing you guys like crazy," she whispered. "After the first few days I realized I was a hopeless case, so I worked extra long so I could finish early. I didn't want to say anything in case I couldn't pull it off." She gazed down fondly at Dev and quietly said, "I'm sorry."

"S'okay," Dev replied. She rolled over and pushed Christopher, and before Lauren's eyes the pile of children shifted dramatically, but no one woke up. Dev opened her arms and Lauren eagerly fitted herself into the space that had been created just for her.

When their bodies touched, both women sighed.

"I'm so happy to be home," Lauren said quietly, her eyes already closing. "I missed you all."

"Not me," Dev answered, feeling Lauren's lips curl into a smile against the sensitive skin of her neck. "I didn't miss you at all. Same with the kids. We hardly knew you were gone."

"I can see that," Lauren chuckled weakly, Dev's words barely penetrating her tired brain.

"Welcome home, sweetheart."

But a warm puff of air and Lauren's gentle snore were Dev's only answer.

Friday, January 14th

Dev sat behind her desk in the Oval Office while Lauren perched on one of the room's two couches. The television news, with the sound so low it could barely be made out, was playing in the background, and the three-dimensional image of an anchorman hovered near the door. They had already had their first two meetings, and now the women were enjoying a quiet breakfast together. Almost. The food had been delivered a half-hour ago and was still sitting untouched on the table while both women worked in their respective spots, Lauren compiling notes on what she'd observed and Devlyn reviewing several documents from the Secretary of Homeland Defense.

The smell of bacon was finally too much for Lauren to ignore. She set down the hand-held computer as she contemplated what she could safely eat considering she'd stopped working out with Devlyn in the mornings several weeks ago. The answer was nothing, so she promptly disregarded that conclusion and thought about something else.

"Devlyn, your mother is going to kill us for foisting the wedding plans on her."

"My mother will love it." Dev signed her name again, wishing she had taken David up on his offer to get her a stamp for the less important documents. But no, she had to be a "President of the People" who signed every scrap of paper that came across her desk. *I think David only listens*

to me on things like this to torture me. He knows he knows best! "By the way, after we get married, you get to sign off on all the kids' report cards."

Lauren stared at Dev. "What?"

"Never mind." She signed her name for the last time and stood up, taking a deep breath. "Come on, sweetheart, let's eat. I'm starved and I've got another meeting in less than a half hour."

Lauren joined Devlyn at the serving table. Once the coffee was poured and they were back on one of the sofas, Dev gave the voice command to increase the volume of the newscast. "Ooo, look who's getting a spot on the news." She gestured as Lauren's face appeared on the screen above a coat rack.

"Terrific," Lauren mumbled around a mouthful of eggs. "I saw them when I ran into Geoffrey yesterday." Her expression darkened. "Assholes." Her short relationship with the media had already been a stormy one. "I should have figured a camera was on me."

"You can never safely pick your nose again."

"I would never!" She laughed, and then winked. "At least in public. But the Republican Party Chairman doesn't let the cameras stop him."

"Why do you think I avoid shaking his hand?"

The television picture shifted to a shot of Lauren walking alongside the Vice President.

"You need to get him out more, Devlyn. Half of America doesn't even believe that Vice President Geoffrey Vincent actually exists. Late night television is saying he's really just a good-looking blowup doll."

Dev burst out laughing. "Brenda must love that one. Rubber-hubby."

Lauren chuckled, but sobered quickly, thinking of why exactly Geoff had to move around so much. The thought of the assassination attempt on Devlyn usually made her physically ill.

Dev patted her hand but didn't say anything.

A still shot of Lauren appeared over the anchorman's right shoulder.

"Presidential fiancée Lauren Strayer's decision to primarily take public rather than government transportation has been called 'insane' by security specialists and 'incredible' by the public.

"White House pollsters are smiling over Ms. Strayer's recent jump in popularity. It seems her refusal to strictly adhere to White House protocol has endeared her to working-class America as well as young voters."

"Television off." The image disappeared. "Well, well," Dev teased Lauren, nudging her with her elbow. "They didn't mention you living here in sin with me. Will wonders never cease? Keep it up and they'll give you my job."

"As if I'd want your job. Trailing around after you all day is exhausting enough. Being you would kill me. Besides, then I'd technically be sleeping with myself and doing things to myself that would make me go blind or grow hair on my palms. And I'm just not up for that. I'll keep my job, thanks."

Dev hastily swallowed her mouthful of coffee so she wouldn't lose it laughing. "Chicken."

Lauren waved her fork at Dev. "Where do you think these eggs came from?"

Dev smiled just as she heard a single knock on her inner office door, and David entered. His gaze stopped on Lauren and his feet ground to a halt. "Oh, I'm sorry, Lauren. I didn't know you'd be here. I thought you were out of town."

"Got back early." She gestured to the couch across from where she and Dev were sitting. "Come have some coffee with us. How's Beth?"

He made a face and loosened his tie. "Mad at me for something, and I can't figure out what." He handed Devlyn a stack of papers before pouring a cup of steaming coffee and sitting down with a groan. "Did you know I'm as dumb as a bag of dirt?"

"I've always suspected," Dev answered as she looked at the papers. "What's this?"

"Your speech for the United Steelworkers of America. You're going to Detroit today."

She looked at Lauren and shrugged. "I am?"

"You are."

"And when was this decided?"

"Last week."

"Shit." She tossed the papers onto the coffee table. "I tell ya, if Liza doesn't get off vacation soon I'm going to lose my mind. That temp who is taking her place is worthless."

David frowned. "Why didn't you say anything? Do you want me to get you another one?"

Lauren gave Dev a knowing look as she spoke to David. "Don't bother. If it's not Liza, she still won't be happy."

"Gotcha." David nodded. "Sorry, Chief, but Detroit it is. You leave at eleven-thirty, but should be home before your munchkins are in bed."

"Great." Dev looked at Lauren with round, innocent eyes. "I guess you get to call Mom by yourself."

Lauren's jaw dropped. "Devlyn!"

Dev lifted her hand. "Honey, what can I do? She's insisting on this call and I'm going to be in Detroit. I asked the temp to clear my schedule for the call, but clearly she missed it somehow." Dark eyebrows drew together in consternation. "You know, I don't think my mom likes talking about the wedding with Michael Oaks." More than once Devlyn had considered firing her personal aide, turned social secretary, because of his poor people skills. But he was good at what he did and had proven himself time and again, earning her trust, if not her friendship.

"Can you blame her?" Lauren glared at David. "You did this just to get her out of this phone call, didn't you?"

David blinked slowly. "Would I do something like that?"

Lauren tapped her coffee mug with her fingernail impatiently. "Yes."

"Okay, I would. But this time, I didn't. It's been on her tentative schedule for a couple of weeks."

Lauren shot them both looks that sent shivers down their spines. "I hate you both."

"Then solve the problem by telling Mom we're eloping." Dev chuckled as she buttered her toast.

"I'd elope with you in a heartbeat, Devlyn," Lauren shot back. "But there is no way on God's green earth I am telling that to Janet Marlowe. You've heard the Princess Diana speech, haven't you?"

Dev rolled her eyes. Had she?

"How she watched it on television in the wee hours of the morning, entranced. The dress, the pageantry...blah...blah...blah."

David grunted in a gesture that Devlyn figured was as close to sympathy as she was going to get from her dear friend. Beth's mother had talked Beth into powder blue tuxedos for his wedding. The memory of those ruffled sleeves still made him slightly ill. "Thanks for the coffee." He stood up. "I'll see you later."

"Thanks so much, buddy." Dev threw a wadded-up napkin at her friend as he fled her office. Then she took Lauren's hand. "I'm sorry you have to do this alone. Mom's probably peeved that

we haven't talked to her about any of the details yet." There was no "probably" about it. Dev's father had warned her a few days ago.

"We don't know any!"

"I know that," Dev replied reasonably. "And you know that. Now you just have to tell my mother that. What can I do to make it up to you?"

Lauren sighed as she looked into guilt-ridden eyes. "I'm sorry. I guess your job makes it impossible to make this small and simple, huh?" It was a rhetorical question, but Dev nodded anyway.

Lauren melted under Dev's gaze. "You're lucky I'm so in love with you."

Dev smiled, recognizing Lauren's surrender. "I know."

"I'll try to be more understanding. And I'll call your mom this afternoon as planned, don't worry."

"Thank you," she said sincerely, knowing that Janet loved Lauren completely and that the younger woman would be subject to far less grief than she herself would.

"But if you want to bring me back a present from Detroit, I won't complain."

"Sure. I can probably get a Chevy in my suitcase." Devlyn leaned forward and kissed Lauren.

"Devlyn?" she muttered against soft lips.

"Mmm?" Dev kissed her again.

"Make it a red 'Vette."

Lauren looked at the phone on her desk, contemplating the device as she held her head between her hands. Finally she sighed, "Call Janet Marlowe."

The phone rang three times and then Janet's hologram appeared. "Hello, sweetheart." She smiled fondly, the motion creasing the skin around her mouth and eyes. "How is my favorite daughter-in-law-to-be today?"

Lauren's smile was wan. "Well, I'm here." She paused, not wanting to deliver the news, but seeing no way around it. "Which is more than I can say about that good-for-nothing Devlyn."

Janet glanced around with narrowed eyes. "Lord help me. That girl will be the death of me yet! What has Devil done now? Do I need to come over there?"

Lauren laughed. The image of the President's mother storming into the White House with a wooden spoon in her hand, ready to strike, was an image she wouldn't soon forget. If there were one person in the world who could do it, it would be Janet Marlowe. "No, you don't need to come over. Devlyn had to go to Detroit today. That's why she's not here."

Janet frowned at the look on Lauren's face. "We'll manage without her, dear. How much help do you think she was really going to be anyway? And when she ends up wearing a light pink 'poofy' dress she won't be able to say a single word about it. Not one."

Janet grinned and Lauren's eyes widened a little. It was an evil little grin that reminded her very much of someone she loved. *Oh, boy.*

"I'm assuming we have a date to work with." It wasn't really a question, but Janet's tone was more gently prodding than angry.

"That's the good news."

Janet waited, but Lauren just looked at her, not saying another word. After a few oddly silent moments Janet said, "Um, dear, usually when someone says there's good news, that means there's bad news to go along with it."

"That is the way it usually goes, isn't it?" Lauren chewed on her lower lip and girded her mental loins. "The bad news is that we only have six months to put the wedding together. But with Devlyn's schedule it's the only good time. I swear," she blurted out. Six months sounded like plenty of time to her, but Michael Oaks had nearly had a stroke when she told him the date they'd selected. She chuckled inwardly, admitting that that part had been sort of fun.

Janet snorted. "Don't worry about it. I've already gotten calls from every wedding planner on the planet. All we need to do is decide which one to use. Then I'll have a little more help," her blue eyes twinkled, "and I won't have to hurt you and Devlyn, who I just know are going to try to leave all the details to me."

She's not angry. Thank God. Lauren felt relief course through her body. "I love you," she heard herself say. It was as though the words were coming from someone else's mouth, but as soon as she heard them, she knew they were true. *Wow.*

Dev's mother laughed softly and smiled. "I know, honey. I love you too. Don't you worry about a thing; these things have a way of working out."

Or not, Lauren thought.

"Are you two going to be home next week so I can come visit and get the ball rolling?"

Lauren's eyes brightened. "Absolutely. Devlyn will be in and out, but we might be able to corner her for ten or fifteen minutes."

Janet nodded smartly, the motion bouncing her thick salt-and-pepper-colored hair. "I'll make all the arrangements and see you next week." She gazed intently at the younger woman. "Lauren, I mean it when I say you shouldn't worry. I know people are making a terrible fuss, and I'm one of them. But things will be all right. You'll see."

Lauren felt a lump develop in her throat. "Thanks, Janet. I wonder if Devlyn knows how lucky she truly is."

"Of course not!" Janet scoffed. "But don't worry, honey." She winked at Lauren. "I'm not above reminding her."